

It's Always the Dead Who Harbor the Most Grudges

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Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
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Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Minecraft (Video Game) , Video Blogging RPF , DreamSMP , Dream SMP
Relationship:	No Romantic Relationship(s) , Jschlatt & Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit , Alexis Quackity & Jschlatt & Toby Smith Tubbo , Jschlatt & Wilbur Soot , Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Jschlatt & Toby Smith Tubbo , Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo & Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Ranboo & Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Floris Fundy & Jschlatt & Toby Smith Tubbo , Floris Fundy & Wilbur Soot , Eret & Floris Fundy , Floris Fundy & Ranboo , Floris Fundy & Jschlatt , Minor or Background Relationship(s) , Clay Dream/Floris Fundy , Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity/Karl Jacobs/Sapnap , Alexis Quackity & GeorgeNotFound & Karl Jacobs & Sapnap , Cara CaptainPuffy & Sam Awesamdude , Cara CaptainPuffy & Sam Awesamdude & TommyInnit , Floris Fundy & Sam Awesamdude , Sam Awesamdude & Toby Smith Tubbo
Character:	Wilbur Soot , Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Toby Smith Tubbo , Floris Fundy , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Sam Awesamdude (Video Blogging RPF) , Cara CaptainPuffy , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity , Eret (Video Blogging RPF) , Niki Nihachu , Jack Manifold , Dream SMP Ensemble , Darryl Noveschosch , Antfrost (Video Blogging RPF) , Connor ConnorEatsPants , Zak Ahmed
Additional Tags:	Canon-Typical Violence , Wilbur Soot and Technoblade and TommyInnit are Siblings , Older Sibling Wilbur Soot , Resurrected Wilbur Soot , Angry Wilbur Soot , Protective Wilbur Soot , Insane Wilbur Soot , Wilbur Soot-centric , Ghost Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Past Alexis Quackity/Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Parental Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Morally Ambiguous Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , resurrected jschlatt , Jschlatt-centric (Video Blogging RPF) , both are quite off the rocker in this installment of, "i was horrible in my past life so lets cause trouble to make up for it!" , Angst , Angst and Hurt/Comfort , Family Feels , Dysfunctional Family , Family Issues , but they are working through them , Traumatized TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Traumatized Tubbo , Floris Fundy Needs A Hug , Past Clay Dream/Floris Fundy , Floris Fundy Has Abandonment Issues , Fox Hybrid Floris Fundy , Moobloom Hybrid Toby Smith Tubbo , Sheep Hybrid Cara CaptainPuffy , Ram Hybrid Jschlatt , Piglin Hybrid Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Enderman-Ghast Hybrid Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Hybrid Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Creeper Hybrid Sam Awesamdude , Protective Sam Awesamdude , Parent Sam Awesamdude , Older Sibling Sam Awesamdude , awesamdad , Sam Nook - Freeform , Protective Cara CaptainPuffy , Parent Cara

[CaptainPuffy](#), [Therapist Cara](#) | [CaptainPuffy](#), [Jschlatt is Toby Smith](#) | [Tubbo's Parent](#), [But like adopted](#), [eventually](#), [Eventual Fluff](#), [Hurt/Comfort](#), [Emotional Hurt/Comfort](#), [Trauma](#), [Implied/Referenced Child Abuse](#), [Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism](#), [Emotional/Psychological Abuse](#), [the trust issues are strong in this one](#) [Family Drama](#), [Family Reunions](#), [Murder](#), [Attempted Murder](#), [im telling you they are not happy](#), [Protective Siblings](#), [The Prison](#), [phil was not a great dad](#), [but he adopted ranboo anyways](#), [Adopted Ranboo \(Video Blogging RPF\)](#), [wilbur is trying his best](#), [schlatt is also trying his best](#), [they feel bad](#), [Reconciliation](#), [Afterlife](#), [Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence](#), [Toby Smith](#) | [Tubbo Deserves Better](#), [Platonic Soulmates](#) [Toby Smith](#) | [Tubbo & TommyInnit](#), [they are best friend your honor](#), [Author is a Toby Smith](#) | [Tubbo Apologist](#), [Toby Smith](#) | [Tubbo is Not Okay](#), [Lots of healing](#), [Fix-It of Sorts](#), [not really im just causing mayhem](#), [Character Death](#), [Other Additional Tags to Be Added](#), [Tags May Change](#), [AO3 Tags - Freeform](#), [Not Beta Read](#), [no beta we die like tommy with lightning](#), [not finished](#), [Implied/Referenced Suicide](#), [Implied/Referenced Character Death](#), [Implied/Referenced Abuse](#), [Assisted Suicide](#), [please read tw warnings](#), [Please Don't Kill Me](#), [im suffering too if its any consolation](#), [No Romance](#), [No Smut](#), [thats gross](#), [Background Relationships](#), [but they aren't important](#)

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by [can_u_count_bees](#)

Summary

When Wilbur and Schlatt are resurrected on the DreamSMP, most are happy to have the charming ex-President back; less are enthused about the drunk tyrant coming in tow.

The same can't be said for Wilbur, who's been biding his time in the afterlife.

Watching.

Seething.

Raging.

His symphony may have finished, but there's an encore calling his name.

And it's permeated with a bloody vengeance.

///

Schlatt thought he didn't care about his traitorous Secretary.

Afterlife changes perspectives.

Watching a teenager try to run a country AND handle the peer pressure of his former, power-hungry Vice President? Exile his best friend under orders of a puppeteer? Watch and hear said puppeteer proudly say they would murder him in cold blood, just so the 'life' of the server stayed in their control? Accepting his fate without question, without argument?

Maybe Schlatt wasn't so heartless;

Because his chest burned hotter than any whiskey or cigarette ever made him feel.

He burned with ungodly fury.

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(TDLR; c!Wilbur and c!Schlatt are gonna riot for everything Tommy, Tubbo and Fundy were put through, along with some family therapy cause they need it)

Notes

THIS IS NOT A SHIP BOOK, TURN BACK IF THATS WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR. DON'T SHIP THE CCs, ESPECIALLY MINORS. HELLA WEIRD. ALSO THESE ARE THE CHARACTERS OF THE SMP, NOT THE CCs.

(there are mentioned canonical relationships, but they are not the focal point of this book)
if on the rare, miniscule chance you're a mcYT reading this: no you're not.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

It's A New Dawn

Chapter Notes

Also this is obviously canon divergence, but this takes place after the Nuke Testing and Tommy's Hotel has been built, and will be following my storyline i've made for this fic. that means if something canonical takes place anytime after what had been said above, it more than likely won't be affecting this fanfic. hence why its canon divergence lmao.

TW for: implied and attempted suicide, suicide, talking about abuse, alcoholism, death, and extreme daddy issues.

have fun

edit 3/1/21: complete edit dump, not rewritten but very much better written

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur thought he understood helplessness.

What it felt like to be invisible, unheard and discarded to the side for something better than he was.

He wasn't enough; not for his father, no, Phil was always too busy with Techno's training or taking care of Tommy and Tubbo to pay attention to Wilbur. Not that Phil did much of the latter, leaving the two young children in the care of a teenager to venture out into the world with his favorite piglin son in tow. Wilbur was left to raise Tommy and Tubbo on his own for the most part, and he didn't get so much as a 'thanks' in return. Just a blithe pat on the back and then they were gone again, like they hadn't just been gone for months.

His resentment for his neglectful father and envy for his impassive brother only grew with the years, and Wilbur vowed to show them that he could be great too. That he wasn't just a nanny or an easy-going musician, because he knew he was so much more than that. Tommy and Tubbo knew too. So when the trio set out on their own, they had bright eyes full of big ideas for the future.

Philza and Techno wished them well and told them to write; even though they would be too busy to respond.

Of course, middle-child syndrome was nothing compared to what he felt when his country, the country *he* founded and ran and loved, the country *he* had fought tooth and nail for, the country that fathered *his* son, was ripped from *his* hands. It only stung worse when it was his long-lost and horned friend who did it, now blinded by a power euphoria and poisoned by the liquor he

consumed non-stop. What really dug into his skin, though, was the fact that his citizens even considered voting for either Schlatt or S.W.A.G 2020; as if Wilbur hadn't done everything for them, like he wasn't the best president they could ask for. Yet again, he was the second choice, a simple afterthought to be forgotten. A measly footnote in history.

Exiled, betrayed, and watching his creation, his so-called *symphony*, be destroyed by the people he thought he trusted. If Tommy wasn't there, Wilbur was alone. He was so small in the dusty and dim ravine of PogTopia. The once bright fire of a man who charmed the hearts of everyone he met and had a warm personality that made even the most irritable people mellow down was washed away, and in its wake came back the quietly jealous child. The child who craved the approval of anyone who would offer it, the child who wanted nothing more than to make an impact, make some sort of noise that would make his father look to him and finally *see* him.

That was what drove him to insanity. Within the confined walls of PogTopia, Wilbur went mad with selfish longing. He yearned for his country, for his power and control he had never had in his life before, his title as 'President,' for the cheers of his citizens when he'd give a speech and the eager to listen Tommy and Tubbo when he'd talk, looking up to him like he was some sort of divine being. He wanted the father, the one who didn't even come to see his own son's election or lift a wing to help in the war.

But no. Instead, he just sent Techno, an anarchist, to help in a government coup d'état so the old government could rise to power again even after being beat out by a democratic election - because he was too busy with work. Wilbur wanted that father to tell him he was proud of him. He *needed* his attention.

If that involved a little TNT, then that's how Wilbur would get his undivided attention for once in his life.

He lost sight of who really mattered as time slowly crawled to his fate:

He stopped seeing Tubbo as his friend and brother-in-arms; instead, he was a traitor double-agent, and Techno publicly executing the sixteen-year old while Wilbur and Tommy watched was fine because of this. He was certain it was Tubbo who had taken his button to ignite the TNT, or else the festival would have gone *perfectly*.

Fundy was no longer his son; he gave up that privilege when he sided with Schlatt. Even when he came crawling back to him, Wilbur despised him. He had been corrupted by Schlatt and was inherently a traitor; just like Eret, just like Tubbo, just like the double-crossing, good-for-nothing Quackity.

Wilbur was rather surprised when Quackity had admitted to wanting to join PogTopia, but when Wilbur saw that dark glimmer in his eyes, the same shimmer that Schlatt had when he waved around his power and exiled Tommy and Wilbur without a second thought, he knew Quackity was only joining for his own gain.

Techno was just a weapon to Wilbur. Someone he could utilize and use to make sure that, no matter what, Phil would show up to finally see what his son had done, what he created, and what he would destroy because he had failed in every way. He had failed as a leader, as a father, and as a son. It had to go, it needed to be cleansed of the corruption that Manberg sowed into its soil. Besides, if Wilbur thought anything more of Techno, it would bring him too many reminders of

how inferior he was compared to the piglin abomination.

Tommy. Even until the very end, Wilbur was so sure, so *convinced* that his right-hand man, his little brother who had looked up to him since he was born, would stay loyal. He had even, for a short time, convinced Wilbur that they didn't need TNT to take back L'Manberg, that they could heal it together and restore it back to the glory it once possessed. It was Tommy who was able to bring him back from the edge of truly losing his remaining sanity. Sure, Wilbur was still pretty out of his mind, but Tommy provided him with solid ground to remind him that he was fighting for something: for his country, for praise, for *recognition*. He was also fighting for a home for Tommy, a place his brother could also feel appreciated for, a place he could feel proud of. Coupled with the fact that Wilbur knew he couldn't be president again due to his unstable and fragile state of mind, he was effectively fighting for Tommy to take his place. He had said once out of anger that Tommy would never be president, and after the wave of guilt that washed over him sent him spiraling only further into his growing depression, he began making the plans and preparing Tommy for presidency if they... No, *when* they won the war.

It all crumbled underneath him when Tommy rejected the presidency.

Everything Wilbur put aside for his younger brother had amounted to nothing. The words of advice, the recounts of events Wilbur dealt with during presidency, the gentle guidance towards leadership, everything was for nothing.

Wilbur was now truly alone. His family betrayed him. His friends betrayed him. Everyone around him had betrayed him in some way. The destructive mindset he thought had disappeared over the last few days leading up to the final battle came back in full-force, and Wilbur now only saw his perfect, ideal end. With nothing left for him to cling to, he could do what he wanted to do in the first place:

Make an impact, make a lot of noise.

He first gave the presidency to Tubbo. He listened to the teen speak, then excused himself. As he left, he knew the joyful celebration wouldn't last long, not while Techno was there. He could tell his older brother was disgusted with the amount of politics on display, and it wouldn't be long until he stirred up a storm. Which was perfect for Wilbur, who knew Phil would be on his way to either side with Techno or convince him to leave his brother's country alone. His father seemed to always have a sixth sense with Techno, like he could smell the anarchist ideology becoming too much for the piglin and knew it would only spill blood, which is one of Techno's favorite things (besides punting orphans). Wilbur didn't care who would be the unlucky individual to face that fate anymore; they were all traitors anyways, and had it coming. It was a constant whisper in his ear, only egging him on as he approached the control room with an unnerving calm.

He knew he was right when he heard the sound of fireworks, and the anguished and bewildered cries of his 'friends' from far off.

He reached the chamber, now scrawled with the L'Manberg anthem and so many buttons, all self-vandalized one night when he had really gone off the deep end, drowning his sorrow and shame that he could never shake away with alcohol (for those dark hours in the night, he could almost understand why Schlatt was so dependent on the bottle). Even when he pushed it down as deep as he could and tried to let his insanity cloud it, it still refused to disappear. None of his feelings ever did; everything within Wilbur felt unresolved, unaddressed. Not that talking could do much now, however. He gracefully fell off the edge of the remaining sanity he possessed and embraced the irrational and trigger-happy version of himself that had been begging to be released for *months*.

He didn't need to think about which button was correct because he had memorized where it was after coming to this very spot so many times. When he began to hear voices in his head, some saying to push it and others pleading with him to not, he spoke to himself aloud. He ranted. He yelled. He screamed. He kicked and punched the cold stone walls, his knuckles splitting open and bleeding red as angry tears pricked the corners of his eyes.

It was childish, like a toddler throwing a tantrum, but Wilbur didn't care. He had the right to be this angry. He deserved to be allowed to destroy what was originally his creation. L'Manberg was gone, and trying to resurrect it was a mistake. It would only crumble again. If Wilbur couldn't have it, if he couldn't be president, and if his people, *his own fucking family*, couldn't appreciate him, well...

No one deserved to have either of them around.

His hand was so close to the button. A mere second and everything would go up in smoke. No more L'Manberg, no more voices chanting at him to detonate it, no more betrayal or backstabbing. It would all be over. Wilbur could finally find release, regain the control he had long lost even for just a moment. He could relish in the feeling, and see how everyone else liked it when they were the ones who got to feel the heavy and helpless feeling of being stabbed in the back.

"What are you doing?"

Finally.

He was *seeing* Wilbur.

As much as Wilbur had thought about what he would say to Phil and how he would say it, he didn't expect for it to be sheepish and soft-spoken. Like a child who knew they were in trouble, and they were about to be scolded. Phil only matched him in tone, though with more worry and stability than Wilbur's shaky inflection.

Phil tried to subtly tell Wilbur not to press it, as he could probably tell by his son's dark eye bags

and messy hair, by his dirty trench coat and mangled beanie, that telling him directly would only do more harm than good. It was all in vain, though. It didn't matter how much Phil pleaded, how much he told Wilbur that he was worried about him and Tommy and Tubbo, how much he and Techno missed them, how he would wish they'd come back home for a while. At this point, Wilbur didn't care if Phil told him he was proud or not. It didn't matter in the past, Wilbur wasn't important enough then, why would he matter now? Especially to Philza, the Angel of Death? What good does empty praise from a god who only ever truly cared about one son do for another who's tired of vying for the scraps?

And for a moment, Wilbur remembered an old ~~friend~~ traitor. He remembered a room similar to this one. He remembered the very thing that traitor said before he pressed a button of his own, and Wilbur would have laughed at how history never fails to repeat itself if he hadn't been preoccupied with making sure his father stared right into Wilbur's tearful eyes while the hissing sounds of gunpowder kissing the sparks of redstone filled the cavern.

"It was never meant to be."

Wilbur raised his hand to his forehead in a salute, the intoxicating, euphoric sounds of TNT behind him and the shocked gasp from Phil as his father watched the wall break open and the land outside become a crater of what once was L'Manberg. Wilbur kept his back towards it, only needing the soothing sounds of explosions and the taste and smell of gunpowder, smoke, and sulfur filling his senses to reassure him that he had completed his mission. He felt light, and he choked back a joyful sob when he turned to see the damage.

Far off, he could see and hear the very mixed reactions of everyone, but they weren't Phil. Wilbur looked at his father, who was astonished by the destruction that was laid out in front of him. In horrified amazement, Phil had seen that his second eldest had been able to reduce a once beautiful country to nothing but rubble in a crater with a press of a button. His second eldest, who he thought was just an aloof, artsy fool, had just blown up an entire country with a blissful smile and shaky sigh of *relief*.

With tears of bittersweet and crazed delight streaming down his face, Wilbur gestured animatedly to the world outside the now exposed cavern. He felt like how he felt when they had won Independence from Dream and his goons. How warm that late summer sun felt as Wilbur hugged his son tightly, as he gave Tommy and Tubbo their official titles as Vice President and Treasurer of State, as they all screamed for Dream to suck it and go back home.

It was a happy moment he was content to remember.

"MY L'MANBERG, PHIL-!"

It was a lovely memory.

“MY UNFINISHED SYMPHONY, FOREVER UNFINISHED!”

Wilbur was content dying with this memory in his mind.

“Phil, Phil kill me!”

Wilbur thrust his sword into his father’s shaking hands, opening himself up for death’s wonderful embrace.

“I...YOU’RE MY SON!”

It was like she was calling to him. Death, that was. She and Wilbur tended to always brush against each other, teasing the idea of finally taking each other by the hand to waltz into the great unknown that was whatever came after death. This time, however, Wilbur wasn’t shy and met the eyes of his fate directly, eyes he had avoided with cowardice because he hadn’t yet understood the true allure that she had to offer: and that allure was the rhapsodic feeling of nothingness. No more melancholy. No more envy or resentment or longing, starved for the affection he’d never receive. No more anything as he eagerly awaited his long-overdue date with Death. He could match her in stride and steps and tempo, no matter how painlessly fast or agonizingly slow she decided to take him.

He was ready to waltz.

When it was obvious Phil refused to move, too dumbfounded by everything going on around him and by Wilbur’s request, Wilbur made it easy for him.

What Wilbur may have lacked in strength, he was proficient in swiftness. For example, he quickly pointed the sword’s tip downwards in Phil’s hands and threw himself into it, the blade cleanly sliding through his chest and out of his back. Warm blood quickly stained his coat and Phil’s face twisted in grief, his grip on the sword loosening.

Wilbur slumped down onto the cold stone, facing to look at the destruction of L’Manberg. His home. Phil pulled the sword out of Wilbur’s chest hastily, but he could barely feel it. Tears freely streamed down Wilbur’s face as blood pooled around him, blood that tasted sweet in his mouth.

Phil dropped down beside him, trying to get Will to roll over to no avail, the rising panic in his father's voice dying out as his senses began to fade to black. He could faintly see Tommy holding an unconscious Tubbo, his brother letting out a wail of dismay. He could see his own son nearby, ears pressed down and agony etched all across his face. Others watched on in similar horror. Even Techno had stopped his anarchy to watch as Wilbur bled out by his father’s hand, even if he had a little bit of help from Wilbur himself.

He felt Phil pull Wilbur into his lap, hugging him and begging for him to not leave.

Wilbur was going to be late for his dance. It was rude to keep a lady waiting. The sun felt so warm on his cold skin as Death gave a polite curtsy, and Wilbur took her hand gently as his heart stalled and his chest stopped rising. His eyes remained open, even in death still mesmerized by the beauty of his creation.

The unfinished symphony accompanied the waltz of Death, the tempo always repeating itself like a broken music disc.

####

Schlatt knew he was a villain.

He was an abusive alcoholic. He was a horrible person in general, but the abusive alcoholic part was the main reason why he said that. He treated people who actually cared about him like shit, and he acknowledges that. He was an addict who never sought help even when it was offered to him. He publicly executed his own secretary of state, beat his husband in drunken stupors, called his archbishop a furry on multiple occasions. He drank instead of doing president work, forcing his workload onto Quackity or Tubbo usually, and would verbally berate anyone in his cabinet for the smallest of annoyances. His ideologies were methodically and insidiously capitalistic, valuing property and money over the well-being of people and the country. He didn't care, he did whatever he wanted. He was influential. He was powerful. He was actively making Manberg a profitable business, and if someone was hurt in his endeavors to further the expansion of his company? That wasn't his problem.

He embraced his villainy. He played his role. He died and the heroes were victorious. Simple as that. His whole death speech was just the drunken ramblings of a man who knew he was at his end, and that before he went he might as well give one last monologue for the road. He never expected his predictions to come true.

In his best and clearest memories, he remembered playful banter between himself and Quackity, the awkward advice to Tubbo about how to be more confident and assertive, because he hated how the kid was so nervous and unsure of himself even when it wasn't Schlatt he was talking to. The weird conversations between Fundy and himself about the most random things, but he was still calling him a furry, even when he was sober.

Still, those memories were few and far between. Most of his memories were blackouts, yelling, drinking, and more blackouts.

Schlatt considered himself to be heartless. It was ironic when he died of a heart attack, but Schlatt only took that as confirmation that he had, in fact, a bad heart. He wasn't good. He didn't have remorse for what he said to others, didn't care about what he did or if it harmed people in the process. His morality was definitely questionable. His actions were downright criminal.

So when he arrived in the Afterlife with no alcohol, a supreme lack of hellfire, and wearing his tattered suit jacket and tie, he was, to say the least, rather surprised. The Afterlife was pretty

boring, just a white void with not much to do, though it was a step-up from where he thought he would be going.

But to put a damper on this pleasant surprise, Schlatt went through withdrawal. You'd think that death would get rid of any disease or sickness you might've faced in life, but Schlatt would beg to differ, as he writhed in pain and sweated bullets. He couldn't count how many times he thought that he was going to die again, vomiting until he was dry heaving and blacking out only to wake up with foamy spit oozing down from his mouth, undoubtedly from a seizure he must've had. Sometimes he thought his head was splitting open, that he was growing a new set of horns, and it hurt so bad that he would scream until his voice was raw and scratchy. Maybe this was hell for Schlatt. Just constant withdrawal, forever and ever.

It didn't last forever, though. Eventually, Schlatt felt better. The migraines calmed to foggy headaches, the seizures and vomiting stopped, and his pain ebbed off into a dull ache that permeated his entire body and made him feel sluggish; definitely preferable to the unbearable state he had been in for so long. If there was still any sort of time in this purgatory, he would've guessed that he had been suffering for weeks. However, there was no telling how time passed here. It could be barely a minute past his demise in the Overworld, or centuries could've passed, leaving him long forgotten to the testaments of time.

And so he hung out in the Afterlife, bored but fine with what he was graciously and undeservedly given, seeing as who he was in life.

What he didn't expect was a certain tall British man to find him there.

Schlatt had been staring off into the vast, neverending expanse of the Afterlife and remembering the memories he could remember, as that's pretty much the only thing you could do here. You never got hungry, thirsty, or had to use the bathroom. You never got tired, so sleep wasn't necessary. You didn't even need to breathe, which was oddly nice to not move while you wallowed in your own boredom. But Schlatt was brought out of it by someone calling out to him. He first brushed it off as him starting to go crazy, but when he started to put a face to the familiar accented tone, he wanted nothing more than to die once again.

He turned to look at the voice coming from behind him, only to be suddenly enveloped in a hug by the sickly-looking Brit. The sudden contact startled Schlatt as he tried to wriggle from the man's grip, but his arms were ironclad and, eventually, Schlatt gave up resisting, resigning himself to the hug until the Brit was done.

Although they may have died enemies, there was a time before the election, before politics and the hunger for power blinded Schlatt and he fell victim to his alcoholism, that they were what could be called 'friends.' Back then, Schlatt still was rather questionable in his morality, but he was more carefree and humorous than the ram-hybrid that died in that van. He and Wilbur actually got on pretty well, having met while Wilbur was still traveling and seeking a place to call home with his younger brother and Tubbo, his brother's friend - he found it peculiar that the moobloom-hybrid wasn't considered a brother in Wilbur's eyes, seeing as all of them were adopted by the Angel of Death, but never questioned him directly because it wasn't his place to ask - and even invited Schlatt to join the country he founded after the War for Independence was over. Schlatt declined, already occupied with a growing business he was co-operating with Connor, a business affiliate he met many years before Wilbur.

However, when his business began to collapse, when he started to accumulate massive amounts of debts and unpaid loans, when Connor parted ways with him after a very heated and hurtful argument, when he was at his lowest low with only a bottle of whiskey or tequila to comfort him: a man in a green hoodie and smiley-face mask showed up at his doorstep with an offer.

He told Schlatt of an election that was being held in the SMP he had been ousted from after a few shenanigans he pulled there, which also effectively cut off his communication with Wilbur. He never heard from him, and Schlatt assumed the president had forgotten about him. The election was rumored to be rigged, and this masked man, Dream he called himself, asked Schlatt if he wanted to have another chance at power. But instead of being a CEO, he'd be a ruler. An *emperor*.

Schlatt felt the phantom feeling of all the power he'd lost in his business being regained in that sort of position of leadership. The additional excess of control sent him into the hungry fantasies of a broken, pathetically spiteful man with nothing to lose and no one left to care about his actions. After all, Connor was gone, Wilbur forgot about him, his company was dying; Schlatt was left to fend for himself. It was more than enough to convince an embittered Schlatt to run, setting his sights for the top of the food chain. And when Schlatt dedicated himself to a goal, it was rare that he ever failed to get there. He was ruthless and persistent, and now with severed bonds, he could reach the full potential of his ambitiousness no matter how rotten and malevolent it became. This here was the point of his drastic devolution from a morally ambiguous but respectable businessman to a cruel, tyrannical drunk, hated by the ones who brought him to that position to control everything.

But they brought that upon themselves. It wasn't Schlatt's fault that they voted one too many times for S.W.A.G 2020 and his own campaign. It wasn't his problem when the two rivals combined their votes and beat out P.O.G 2020 by an incrementally small percentage, because if they really didn't want anyone else to win they would've voted for Wilbur and his L'Manberg and it would've been settled. Just to rub salt into the wound with how dismally screwed over the citizens had made themselves, he exiled the ex-president and his little brother, showing how that was just the *start* of Schlatt's reign. He would ride that power-trip until he crashed and burned; whether or not L'Manberg came down with him didn't matter.

This is precisely why you don't vote for the joke candidate.

In a brief moment of clarity, though, as he stood upon the stage in front of the citizens of the newly-named Manberg, as Wilbur stared up at him with bitterness and Tommy with perplexed ire, he caught sight of Tubbo, L'Manberg's now ex-treasurer. He looked so confused, frightened even. The moobloom-hybrid briefly reminded him of himself when he was younger, before he became a cut-throat businessman with a distorted sense of humor. His friends weren't even paying any mind to him, instead looking at each other and whispering frantically as they tried to figure out what was going on. He wasn't privy to their conversation even though he too had just lost his job. When Schlatt had interactions with the whole trio, usually brief, he always noticed how the moobloom was usually left out of the conversation if Wilbur was talking to Tommy or vice versa. He was invisible to them, a side-character to their story arcs. A push-over. Maybe it was time the kid got a chance to be his own character.

That's when he made the spur-of-the-moment decision and declared Tubbo as his secretary of state. No longer was he going to play a supporting role, he was being thrust into the spotlight.

The clarity faded, and he went back to being corrupt and antagonistic. Tubbo never again reminded him of himself, and he forgot about the thoughtful moment when he took pity on the teen and gave him a place to start being his own person instead of a side-kick.

Still, in the few good memories he had of the teen, he was smarter than most gave him credit for. Maybe even smarter than Schlatt at times. He wasn't a very good liar, so it wasn't too hard to eventually realize that he was a spy, but he was clever and sneaky enough to hide it for so long without Schlatt growing suspicious. It was *respectable*, but foolish to cross a man as callous and far gone as Schlatt. He had no remorse for the traitor when he ordered his execution. Not even a moment of clarity that maybe, just maybe, this was crossing a few lines. It's just another reason why Schlatt was adamant that he didn't have the capacity to care. He never stopped to think about how liqueur and the tunnel-vision powered by greed and growth and control may have sedated his empathy and regard for others.

Now that he had none of that to hide behind and drown himself in, maybe sobriety could introduce him to human emotions once again. And his first reintroduction was Wilbur, who was like a slap in the face to Schlatt's entire system.

Once Wilbur released him, Schlatt took a couple steps back and fixed his suit, smoothing out the wrinkles created by the tight squeeze he was just trapped in. He looked up to face his former enemy to tell him off for ruining his suit he had spent hours fixing after his withdrawal phase. What stopped him was the dried scarlet that covered Wilbur's trench coat and shirt beneath. He smelled like ash and lit gunpowder, and if his tattered, singed attire was anything to go by, something went *boom*. It raised an uncharacteristic worry within the ram-hybrid, the first clear and sober feeling he'd felt in a very, very long time.

"What the fuck did you do, you goddamn pyromaniac?"

A content look rested on Wilbur's face, and now that Schlatt wasn't preoccupied with being intoxicated and bitter, he could see the sickly features of his friend from once upon a time. His dirt-colored hair was matted and unkempt, strands fraying every which way even beneath the old, faded beanie that concealed the rest of it. His eyes were no longer the chocolate brown ablaze with ideas and a charming glint, instead being a dull charcoal color, heavy with exhaustion. The bags beneath his eyes were an unsettling and ill-looking purple, like he hadn't slept in years. His cheeks were hollow and his whole face looked gaunt, and now that Schlatt really took a close look at him, Wilbur was incredibly *thin*, nothing like the handsome and well-fed man Schlatt had known before the election.

Wilbur was slow to reply, like he was reminiscing on something, but when he finally spoke it was slow and smooth, though lacking a certain dramatic and theatrical inflection he always seemed to use when he spoke.

"It's gone."

"What? What do you mean it's gone? Wilbur, why the fuck are you here?" Schlatt didn't mean for his voice to rise in pitch, an unfamiliar and uneasy feeling pooling in his gut.

"You said it yourself, Schlatt." Wilbur sighed, looking not at Schlatt but through him, obviously somewhere else in his head. "When you die, so does the country."

"Wilbur, what the hell do you mean-?"

"I got rid of it."

Schlatt grabbed the Brit's arms and shook him, trying to take him out of his own head and get him to stop being so vague.

"Wilbur! Fucking focus, man," Schlatt urged, a frustrated growl lacing between the letters of his words. *"What did you do?"*

Wilbur's head rolled limp and tilted to the side, blinking slowly at Schlatt. A lazy grin pulled at his colorless lips, another ill-fitting feature Schlatt noticed. Had he always been this pale?

"I blew it to high heaven," He said with a light laugh.

Schlatt stalled and his grip loosened on Wilbur, his face draining of color as realization crept up on him. His final words, words he had meant to just be empty threats and weak attempts at getting a rise out of everyone, they had become true.

"You know, if I die-

It wasn't meant to come true. They were supposed to keep the country alive to spite Schlatt's dead body. Take it back and then everything would go back to the way it was, they were *meant* to do that. They were supposed to dance on Schlatt's grave and rub it in his face that the government was still running just fine and that the country was prospering.

-this country goes down with me."

Now it was gone. He was right. He should've been happy, danced around, and told Wilbur *'I told*

you so' a thousand times. He should be laughing maniacally. He hated that country. He despised its citizens and his cabinet and now it was all over. It was done. It was over.

So why was Schlatt slamming his fist weakly against Wilbur's chest, muttering hoarse curses and asking Wilbur why he had to go and make it all real? Why he had to go and make the bad guy *right?*

Wilbur was unfazed as he patted Schlatt's back soothingly, speaking in a soft and aloof tone Schlatt has never heard before. "We were both the bad guys in the end," He admitted. "You won't be the only villain in their history, now."

Schlatt hated this. Wilbur wasn't meant to be a villain. He was a *good* guy.

It only got worse when Wilbur brought him into a hug, quiet sobs shaking Schlatt's body as they stood there. Wilbur placed his chin on top of Schlatt's head, and he spoke again before silence rested tensely between them.

"Don't blame yourself. It only makes things harder to accept."

####

Wilbur *thought* he knew what it was like to be helpless. Invisible. Unheard.

He was wrong.

He and Schlatt didn't really understand how the Afterlife worked, but they eventually found out they had the power to almost spectate the Overworld. By closing their eyes and lulling themselves into a sleep-like state, they could enter the Overworld domain, though they were powerless other than to watch and listen. They could only stay for a few days at a time before having to return to the Afterlife to recuperate. It could be minutes by the time they returned to the Overworld; it could be weeks. Time in the Afterlife passed differently than in the Overworld, and it didn't help that it decided to fluctuate every other time they came back. They could go out and it would be hours after they had last visited, come back for what only felt like a few hours at most, go out again and a week would have passed. It was annoying when they had to play catch up.

Wilbur was also unsure of how he had a secondary version of himself that people could see and interact with, but since the Afterlife didn't give any answers, he accepted this 'Ghostbur' and went

on with his day.

Wilbur was almost always hovering around Ghostbur when visiting the Overworld, as most of the time the ghost was with Tommy or pestering Fundy. He wasn't sure if the ghost could see or hear him, but if he could, then the ghost wasn't making any effort to communicate it. Even though Wilbur still thought of them to be traitors at the time, he felt somewhat relieved to see that his younger brother and his only son were at least faring well in the wake of his death.

Ghostbur was definitely the version of himself everyone liked to remember, all of Wilbur's good qualities, a bit airheaded at times but otherwise well-meaning. He was the version Phil had always seen Wilbur as. That irked Wilbur a little.

Wilbur would watch. He'd listen. He watched as Tubbo and Tommy and others rebuilt L'Manberg. Tommy was once again vice-president, and Tubbo was adjusting to the presidency well. Fundy had moved from L'Manberg to live with Eret, who he learned had adopted the fox-hybrid under Phil's permission. He, initially, was heavily against it, because, after all, it was Eret, the traitor. But, as if Ghostbur could hear his protests and wanted to put him in his place, to remind him of how it came to this, he said it for what it was:

"How awful of a person was I?"

Wilbur didn't follow Ghostbur for a while after that.

After watching Fundy and Eret for a time, Wilbur slowly grew to realize his mistakes as a father. The same mistakes his own father had made, mistakes he told himself he wouldn't follow in. He neglected Fundy and picked Tommy to be his right-hand, his vice president. When he stepped down from his presidency, he gave it to Tommy. Fundy was his son, he should've been his first choice, traitor or not. He may have stopped seeing him as a son in his past life, but now he wanted nothing more than to take it all back. To try and rectify his wrongs. He always babied Fundy, never saw him as the intelligent and great person he was and instead as a child. He was older than Tommy, and he treated Tommy like he was older than Fundy!

The first time he felt a spark of anger was when Fundy was left at the altar by Dream. His son was so upset, and he could do nothing to comfort him. He could only watch as his son fell deeper and deeper into a snake's den. He wished he could pull him out by the tail and lecture him about the dangers of living within your own mind. He so desperately wanted for him to not end up like himself. He didn't need to watch his son turn into that. He was just glad when Eret was there. He seemed to bring Fundy out of his own head. He was a good dad. Wilbur may never forgive him for his actions in the first war, but he could still be thankful for his concern for Fundy, and how he could fill the void Wilbur had created due to his incompetence as a parent. He just wished he could refill that void himself instead of with a surrogate.

Now, Fundy was okay for the most part. Sure, he tried and failed to execute his piglin uncle, put his grandfather under house arrest, and betrayed L'Manberg again in the final war, watching as his father's homeland was, for a final time, blown to holy hell by TNT and withers, but Wilbur would've done the same for the latter; L'Manberg was never meant to be. Wilbur was also still angry that Dream left his son at the altar, and that Phil and Techno didn't try to comfort him when Wilbur died. Phil pawning him off to someone else to act as a father and Techno simply up and

leaving was anger-inducing to Wilbur, but Fundy would be fine. He could handle it because he at least had a stable and reliable support system beneath him.

Tommy was an entirely different story.

Wilbur never thought he could feel so much *fury* until he started to follow Tommy around, both at the careless teen *and* those who surrounded him.

First, he and some enderman-hybrid he befriended set George's house aflame. Wilbur would've punted the insolent child for his lack of awareness that he had destroyed someone's *home*. He still had no idea why he thought to do it. He wished he could ask.

Then, he was imprisoned and sent to trial, with Tubbo having to try to defuse his loud-mouth brother and keep peace between the DreamSMP and L'Manberg. It obviously didn't go very well. Then, Dream gave Tubbo a choice - exile Tommy, or never have peace. Tubbo, after giving Tommy so many chances and being put under immense pressure by Dream, was forced to exile him. Wilbur wasn't mad at Tubbo, he knew Tubbo was doing what he thought was right, that's always what he has done. No, he was angrier at Dream.

He acted as if exile was the only option, pressured Tubbo, and threatened L'Manberg, *knowing* the country couldn't handle another war. The manipulative green bastard was getting away with his blatant abuse of power now that Tubbo and Tommy didn't have Wilbur to call him out on it. They were kids, they couldn't help but be scared of Dream. He was, after all, the founder of the SMP. It practically made him God, though he didn't seem to possess any type of divine power.

Wilbur's blood only boiled further when he watched what Tommy was put through in exile. Many times he caught himself punching at Dream or hugging Tommy, only for them to walk straight through him. Powerless to do anything, he watched as Tommy was abused and broken down, his appearance deteriorating along with his spirit. Then, against all of Wilbur's predictions, Tommy became compliant with Dream, no longer the wild child Wilbur had left behind.

Tommy; who once had dueled and died by Dream's hands; who had given up his most prized possessions to him in order to give L'Manberg independence, just for Dream to turn around and aid his delusional older brother in destroying it; who watched as Dream forced his best friend and the residents of his home to turn their backs on him and stay stuck in exile; Tommy, who had every reason to hate and distrust and fight against Dream, now considered the masked man a friend. Dream had convinced him of that, brainwashed him into believing that no one else cared for him. He made sure no one showed up to the beach party. He barred everyone from seeing him, and then turned around and gaslit Tommy into thinking Dream was the only one who cared about him. Dream, and Dream alone.

Wilbur felt sick watching and listening.

Then, one day while he was in the Afterlife taking a break from the Overworld, the void suddenly felt like it was growing. The space around him and Schlatt was shifting, making room for someone, though how they knew that exactly they simply pegged down as them beginning to be in sync with

the Afterlife. Both nervous as to who was joining them soon, they both hurriedly returned to the Overworld.

Wilbur checked on Fundy first. He was ok, doing something with Punz and Quackity. He could feel his connection to the Overworld beginning to fade. He had already been there a few hours prior and was supposed to stay in the Afterlife for longer while he regained enough energy to handle the exertion the Overworld weighed on him. He pushed forward, though, hurrying to Logstedshire to check on his little brother.

When he arrived, he knew he wouldn't be able to stay in the Overworld for much longer. However, as he looked over the blown-up remains of Logstedshire, and to the pillar of dirt that stood eerily off in the distance, and up at the shadow of his brother who teetered on the edge at the top of said pillar, Wilbur wished he had a voice, that he could stand below Tommy and catch him in his arms and tell him everything was going to be okay. He wished Tommy could see him, know he was there for him. His cries of protest as he was dragged back into the Afterlife were primal, not wanting to leave his brother by himself again.

When he could no longer fight the grip of the Afterlife, he watched as the Overworld faded into the taunting white void he was imprisoned in. A prison his brother would be joining soon, and he could do absolutely *nothing* to stop it. Torturous wails escaped his throat as he keeled over on himself, falling to the ground as he was racked with anguished sobs that echoed in the void around him.

Invisible. Helpless. Unheard.

In that moment, he realized how utterly *selfish* he was. He was so focused on getting the attention of his father, so resentful and self-centered about proving himself that he had failed to see that he had others to care for. He had a family who loved him, and he neglected them in one way or another all over his daddy issues. He was a coward for killing himself, an idiot for thinking that dying would solve anything. He wished he hadn't thought of his friends and family as traitors, because most of them weren't. Tommy not wanting the presidency wasn't him betraying Wilbur. Tubbo only ever gave them information and never once showed signs of double-agency, and Wilbur let him get executed by his older brother. Fundy only came to resent Wilbur because he never treated him as an equal, never thought of him first before Tommy or Tubbo, so his rebelling against Wilbur shouldn't have come as a surprise. It certainly wasn't grounds to stop seeing him as his son. Sure, it stung, but Fundy was hurting and sought out others who would treat him like an adult. Schlatt was far from the best source for it, but at least he treated Fundy like his age.

Wilbur had failed them. He was no glorified revolutionist or insane terrorist, he was far from it. He was a vain, delusional, and sad man, who valued the attention of his father - who had made it clear he wasn't interested in Wilbur or Tommy as much as he was Techno an infinite amount of times - over the love and adoration and needs of the family he already had. He didn't need a title. He didn't need power. He needed them, that's all he really needed. They gave him more than enough recognition, more than enough praise and love, yet he took them for granted. He tossed them aside and died and now he lives with his consequences. His own personal little hell was watching his family suffer, and it was all because he couldn't stop to see what he already had in front of him.

He could only thank whatever *demented* deity that existed when Tommy never showed up in the Afterlife, Wilbur returning to the Overworld as soon as he could to discover he was living in

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Schlatt wasn't really sure why he chose to return to the Overworld just to watch his former secretary of state do boring presidential things. It was probably because he would try to find a way to die a second time if he remained in the Afterlife any longer, and watching the reconstruction of Manberg was at least interesting. He was glad he was invisible to everyone. He didn't need to unsettle the nice atmosphere the country had regained over the months of remodeling, and he quite enjoyed seeing how well Tubbo was doing as a president.

Though he couldn't help but feel some pity for the teen. He was still young and running a country was no easy feat. Schlatt couldn't count how many times he had popped into the Overworld just to see Tubbo hunched over a desk, signing papers and reading documents. Still, Schlatt would stick around. He wasn't looking for anything particularly interesting, and he didn't know anyone else he'd want to watch other than Quackity, though after hearing him talk about trying to revive him, he decided he was going to just stick with Tubbo.

He already caused so much damage to the SMP and its inhabitants. When there was a loud noise, Tubbo would jump or shield himself with his arms instinctively. Quackity stiffened at the smell of alcohol or the sound of glass breaking. Fundy covered himself more, like he was ashamed of his hybrid qualities. Bringing him back was a mistake. They didn't need him back. He didn't want to come back. *At first.*

However, it all changed once he started to see how Tubbo was treated.

Maybe it was his newfound sobriety giving him a clear view, but Schlatt was pretty sure pressuring a kid into exiling his best friend - no matter how unbearably annoying he might've been - was not the definition of 'choice.' He watched as his former vice president convinced the impressionable teen president that hunting down the anarchist with the foreboding moniker '*Blood God*' who was also responsible for murdering the teen would help resolve some of Manberg's still outstanding grudges.

Of course, it went over horribly. The guy's catchphrase is literally that he never dies.

Schlatt had a lot of mixed emotions regarding Tubbo at this point. He knew he didn't have the right to worry about the kid, not after everything he had put him through; but at the same time, he wasn't *that* version of Schlatt anymore. He wasn't denying everything he had done in the past, no, he would live with that and he deserved to be held accountable. But it didn't stop him from feeling a weird kinship with the teen, his empathy and emotional range vastly increasing while sober. Tubbo didn't have anyone to really talk to and be a kid with after Tommy was exiled, and most adults he'd had in his life were not suited to be a role model of any kind. He was an orphan, and as much as he fought himself over it, Schlatt wanted to be in his corner. No one was, not unless they had ulterior

motives.

Schlatt questioned his own motives, sometimes thinking that this was some sad excuse to rid himself of the growing guilt he'd been facing over the months he'd spent in the Afterlife over the way he's treated those who cared about him, even just a little bit. He wasn't even sure if Tubbo had any interest in the ram-hybrid while he was alive. For all Schlatt knew, Tubbo hated his guts, witnessing him wincing when his best friend compared him to the late tyrant.

What he didn't question was the ire instilled in him when Tubbo was played for a fool.

Watching Tubbo sob his heart out after discovering the remnants of his friend's exile and the ominous pillar of dirt and stone that was too tall to not be fatal was worse than anything Schlatt had ever experienced. The utter raw emotion from the teen twisted Schlatt's stomach, but he couldn't do anything to help him. But when his friend showed up weeks later with Tubbo's murderer, saying that they were teamed up and that Tubbo betrayed him, Schlatt wanted nothing more than to knock some sense into the abrasive blonde and strangle the piglin with his bare hands.

Watching as the two friends met once again a week or so later, hearing as the same blonde told Tubbo he was worth less than the two pieces of scrap metal he was so headstrong on getting back? Schlatt quite literally would've thrown that child if he hadn't apologized and joined back at Tubbo's side. Also if Wilbur hadn't been filling him in on everything that Tommy had been through, which only fueled his rising fury.

Watching as Tubbo lived and fought through yet another war? Schlatt could barely watch as Tubbo shielded his best friend from a firework, even though it ended up killing them both. Luckily, they were strong, and respawn was gracious to them. He and Wilbur both seethed, both equal in their desire for revenge against Techno, Phil, and Dream. They only ever harmed or took advantage of the kids and then left them in the dust. Schlatt and Wilbur had it. Schlatt did enjoy watching Ghostbur give Phil a piece of his mind, feeling smug as the Angel of Death became flustered by the ghost's loud, echoing voice as he yelled at him. Schlatt thought he had heard Wilbur's voice break through at some point, but it was probably just his imagination.

Then, when Tubbo moved away to Snowchester and began to experiment with nukes because he was so scared of his new home being attacked, Wilbur informed Schlatt of Niki and Jack's plan to try and kill Tommy, and that Tubbo could also be in danger, even though Jack seemed to have struck up a friendship with the moobloom-hybrid. Schlatt could've slammed his head into a wall. They just deserved to be kids. They only did stupid shit and made fatal errors because they were expected to have the knowledge of an adult. They were expected to do so much and when they messed up, they were villainized for it.

The most terrifying moment Schlatt had ever experienced, however, came when Tubbo and Tommy set out to face Dream. Schlatt and Wilbur were so sure that the teens had beat the masked bastard before he held a sword to Tubbo's neck and demanded Tommy to choose between Tubbo or the discs. It made Schlatt's blood run cold. Seeing the kid, *his* kid, tell Tommy to just take the discs and run, like he was asking to die; it shattered any remaining thought that Schlatt was heartless, because at that moment he felt it both shatter from heartbreak and pound in his chest with apprehension.

After a maniacal laugh and monologue, Dream forced the teens to follow him, and he took them to a secret base at the bottom of the mountain they had fought on top of. In there were Tommy's *real*

discs, along with other items and pets lost or presumed dead. Dream monologued some more, saying how Tommy was the glue of the server or something, Schlatt didn't really care for what the guy had to say.

"I'm gonna kill Tubbo, and then you're gonna come with me, Tommy."

"I'll give you a few minutes, say your good-byes."

"I'm not kidding. He's losing his last life today."

Schlatt wished he was corporeal because, at this moment, he would've rammed his sharp horns into the smug man's neck, and then made sure he suffered long and slow until he was the one who lost his last life.

"It's okay. I'm okay with it."

"It's my time to go."

"We had a good time while we could."

Schlatt hated the way Tubbo sounded resigned to his fate. He didn't even protest it, it was Tommy who did it for the both of them. Even then, Tubbo told Tommy it wasn't worth it. Told him that he wasn't getting out of here alive, no matter what they did. He comforted his friend, who quietly sobbed and told him that despite how it seemed, Tommy always thought of himself as Tubbo's sidekick. That Tubbo was always the better one out of the both of them. That he didn't know who he was without Tubbo with him-

"Yourself."

Schlatt couldn't see or hear Wilbur, but he could feel the brit's strong mourning. Schlatt would lose a son he didn't have the right to call his own; but Wilbur would lose a friend *and* watch his brother suffer without his other half.

The indescribable relief he felt when Punz and Co. walked through the portal could've made him

faint. He watched with satisfaction as Tommy killed Dream, taking away two of his three lives. That probably shouldn't have been his initial feeling, seeing as the teen had already experienced enough violence for two lifetimes, but it just felt *good* to watch the green bastard get what he deserved. He was disappointed when Tommy didn't just kill him. Schlatt never gave the man a book on resurrection, he gave him a pack of beer. He was lying to save his own ass, and once again, everyone, including the kids, believed him. Dream got to live.

Wilbur and Schlatt didn't like that one bit.

While watching Tommy and Tubbo sit on the bench overlooking the sun coming over the horizon and listening to the newly retrieved Mellohi, Wilbur suddenly appeared. His ghost simply manifested behind the two of them, Schlatt now able to see him perfectly, just more transparent and... healthier. Nothing like how he had looked over the months they'd spent in the Afterlife, no, this Wilbur was the one he remembered meeting. His hair was groomed, there was a healthy glow to his skin, and he was no longer so gaunt. His eyes were once again a warm chocolate color with no dark eyebags beneath them, full of pride for his younger brother.

He told Tommy how proud he was of him. Wilbur had realized in death that L'Manberg wasn't his symphony, rather, Tommy was. It was family. The symphony was never unfinished because the land Wilbur idolized had been corrupted; it was unfinished because he needed to see Tommy finish what he began, realizing that his family, the ones that cared about him, had to finish what they had started. And that was exposing Dream for what he was; a manipulative liar.

Schlatt was jealous that Wilbur got to speak to the two of them, but he was also glad. He wasn't sure how either of them would've reacted to the once evil tyrant showing up completely sober and full of apologies. He was at least happy to see Wilbur start to make some sort of peace with his kin, bickering like old times when Tommy brought up the topic of resurrection and Wilbur acted as if he had no idea what Tommy was talking about.

Schlatt didn't know if he would ever make peace. If not peace, then he at least wanted to give those he hurt some closure. Let them know that he regrets his actions, that he was sorry and if they needed anything, Schlatt would do his best to help. He would try to make it up to them, even if it took eternity.

Still, he and Wilbur still harbored an unhealthy amount of anger for all the wrongs their kids had experienced, and it finally boiled over when Niki attempted to lead Tommy to the nuke testing site to get blown up while Jack stalled Tubbo to try and get his best friend killed. His only remaining family he had left that *cared*.

That's when Wilbur and Schlatt began plotting.

Wilbur's symphony may have finished, but there was an encore calling his name. And it was permeated with a bloody vengeance.

Maybe Schlatt wasn't so heartless; because his chest burned hotter than any whiskey or cigarette

ever made him feel. He burned with ungodly fury.

By themselves, they were probably no match for someone like Dream. Together, they had a slight chance. But both fueled by similar motives of revenge? Adding on Schlatt's unrelenting persistence that never failed to get him to his goal and Wilbur's clever quick-thinking; they would be an unstoppable force.

And it was only a matter of time before someone resurrected them. All they had to do was wait.

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Admittedly, when it did finally happen, Wilbur was napping, and Schlatt was just pacing back and forth like he tended to do while he waited in the Afterlife. He had been gone from the Overworld for a few days and was starting to get antsy, even though he still couldn't go back yet. He said that last time he had gone, Tubbo was talking about decommissioning the Nukes with Jack. The man's name made him feel sour, precisely why Wilbur stopped listening and napped instead. He wasn't tired, it was just a great way to avoid conversations he didn't want to have at the moment.

It didn't feel any different from visits to the Overworld. It was slow at first, the white void fading gradually into the landscape of the SMP. Except, neither of them were leaving the Afterlife, and the place visualizing around them was not anywhere they had been before, even in its very blurred form. Schlatt woke Wilbur in bewilderment, asking if he was seeing what was happening around them. Wilbur nodded, sitting up from the floor as it shifted beneath him, becoming much more uneven and jagged, forcing Wilbur to stand.

The scene around them began to clear, Wilbur now registering the late-night sky above them and the tall rising rock walls of... a crater? The ground beneath them was a mix of bedrock and stone, criminally uneven and with many holes to trip into. They seemed to be in the middle of it, red candles surrounding him and Schlatt in a circle with what looked to be redstone connecting them and a small fire pit in front of them, two items burning within it, both too melted to identify.

Finally, when the world around them was clear, clearer than it ever was while spectating, Wilbur and Schlatt fell right on their asses, hitting their heads together in the process. They were so used to levitating in the Overworld that they simply expected to start floating, forgetting to use their feet, and they immediately lost balance. Both groaned as the blunt force of pain hit them for the first time. It had been a while since either of them had felt physical pain (even though sometimes their emotional pain felt physical), so it was a shock to the system, but it assured them that they were corporeal again.

After looking around again and pinching himself a couple times, Wilbur looked to Schlatt to express the excitement building in his chest. The sight that met him was not what he expected. Schlatt still wore the same white dress shirt and black slacks, having ditched the jacket and tied the tie around his wrist a while ago. However, his dark, goat-like eyes were no more, instead replaced with entirely white eyes, no iris or sclera to be found. His hair, too, usually brunette, was a stark white like his eyes. His horns even changed, once an aged ivory color had turned blood red. Wilbur tugged at his own hair, seeing the white strands standing out in his hand, and he could only assume

he too had whited-out eyes due to the way Schlatt's face turned curious.

While they remembered how to breathe, they didn't notice the small group behind them gawking at who had just appeared before them. One was a tall creeper-hybrid with short green hair, who held a netherite sword and looked ready for a fight at any moment. He wore a spray painter's mask that covered much of his lower face, revealing only a pair of black eyes with white pupils. He also had goggles on his head, with a patterned green hoodie and jeans. Next to him was a woman with wool-like hair and small, earth-colored horns that poked out from beneath her sheep-like ears, holding clothes and a first-aid kit. She had on what looked to be a pirate hat and a ruffled shirt that reminded Wilbur of the ones he wore during the first war. Behind those two stood a very tall teenager: an enderman hybrid with white vitiligo and heterochromia, possessing one green eye on the black side of his face and one red eye on the white side. His hair was even split into two separate colors, a small crown resting on his head and a thin tail with a similarly colored and fluffy tip swishing around anxiously. The last one stood next to the sheep-hybrid, a human this time, wearing a... Sonic onesie? He held a very old leather book in his hands, mouth agape in the shared shock of the others.

It was hardly the group you'd expect to bring back two of the most important people to have ever existed on the server.

Eventually, the creeper-hybrid cleared his throat. Wilbur and Schlatt snapped towards the noise, meeting the mixed glances of the quartet. Their eyes must've been unsettling for the enderman-hybrid at least, who looked away from both of them. The human looked at Schlatt like he was an old friend, while the creeper and sheep-hybrid stared at them in an analyzing manner, like they were trying to see if they were agitated or confused.

The group was the least of their concern. They had better things to worry about.

"Where are Fundy and Tommy?"

"Where is Tubbo?"

The sky began to grow lighter as the sun rose on a brand new day.

Chapter End Notes

schlatt and wilbur have all three lives back!!! what will they do? you'll just have to wait and see....

this entire story is inspired by one tiktok by snapp_art_ , which is why the first 5 chapters are titled after the chorus of 'Feeling Good' by Michael Bublé. Please check her out, she's a wonderfully talented artist!!! Her twitter is also Snapp_art!!

link is here: <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMeLGeUn3/>

lastly, i hope you all have a wonderful day, and i'll see you in the next chapter!!

It's a New Day

Chapter Notes

sorry for the delay!! these chapters will take me a week or two to write completely and then a few days to revise and edit, but i hope that this will have been worth the wait!! last one i wrote 10000+ words in 25 hours within two days, and as much as i am glad how it turned out: i do not wish to try that again anytime soon

edit 3/1/21: A RAW POTATO?!?!?! REALLY? its not even funny. goddamnit i didn't ask to cry today yall make animatics too fast.

edit 3/4/2021: what the actual fucking fuck WHYYYYYYYYY I HATE THIS GODDAMN SMP I ONLY STAY BECAUSE OF THE ART AND ANIMATICS. anyways let's all remember this is canon DIVERGENCE-.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sam and the rest of the group jumped at Wilbur and Schlatt's voices that barely reached above squeaking whispers, their words becoming muddled beneath fits of violent coughing.

It seemed to jolt them all from their amazed state, Puffy and Connor quickly moving to Wilbur and Schlatt while Ranboo and Sam stayed back to observe from afar.

Despite their original theories on how they might look when returning to the land of the living, they couldn't have guessed it would be such a drastic difference from their past appearances. The snow-white hair and eyes almost glowed beneath the moon's dying light and their skin looked to be a faint translucent grey, like they still weren't completely alive despite displaying the obvious signs of life. Wilbur's tattered trench coat and shirt were still stained with dark splotches of blood, though long dried. There was even a tear in the Brit's shirt, exposing an old scar which dipped into his chest. Schlatt, on the other hand, seemed to have shed his suit jacket and now had just the haphazardly buttoned wrinkled dress shirt and red tie tied tightly on his right wrist. His once curled, beige horns were now dark red, reminding Sam of the multiple jokes and references to Schlatt being the Devil, and from where he stood right now, he wasn't inclined to disagree. Both of them looked disheveled to some degree, each sporting messy hair and dark eye-bags as if they hadn't slept for awhile, despite being literally dead for the past five months. The book had warned them of the cosmetic side effects of being brought back to life, and while they were only temporary and lasted for a day or two at most, Sam couldn't help but marvel at the differences.

Connor handed the resurrection book to Sam before going with Puffy, the book no longer what the guy needed to focus on as he rushed to his old friend's side. Sam looked at the book's leather covering, memories of the events leading up to this running through his mind.

Admittedly when Sam had found the decrepit and aged book amongst the items Dream had left in that final bunker room, he had thought he found Ranboo's actual memory book he had supposedly lost months ago. The pages were yellow and torn at the edges from what looked to be a well-loved book. Its title had been scratched out, the leather completely shredded in that specific area of the cover. It looked to be years old, though assuming the enderman-hybrid had been wandering aimlessly with a barely functional memory for most of his life, the book had probably grown up with him. Furthering Sam's theory, it had the indecipherable language of Ender scrawled throughout it! So why *wouldn't* it be the overgrown teen's?

Sam felt terrible when he learned about Ranboo's stress over the book, the teenager having disclosed it to him one day while he hung around Snowchester. Sam had been waiting for Tubbo to accompany him to the Big Innit Hotel site, but the moobloom was busy giving Foolish a tour of the quaint town. So, Sam was sitting out on the pier, looking over the water when Ranboo had appeared beside him, his lanky and sturvous size dwarfing Sam, but the teen compensated by pressing his knees to his chest while he sat beside Sam.

When Sam asked what the enderman was doing so far from where he had taken up residence in the Arctic Empire, Ranboo simply shrugged, said he woke up nearby and just followed the rising smoke. Sam was worried about Ranboo's lapse in memory, but the teen brushed it off too quickly for him to ask if he remembered anything, already cracking a humorous one-liner that Sam couldn't help but grin at.

Ranboo was never the best at addressing his inexplicable behavior, and when Sam and Puffy had tried to ask him directly about it, he poorly formed an impromptu excuse and ran away before either of them had a chance to try and stop him. So, Sam had taken to just letting the enderman slowly come around, leaving a line out for the enderman to grab a hold of whenever he felt ready to talk seriously. Puffy was still keen on being direct with Ranboo, though it was apparent who was getting closer to cracking through the thick walls Ranboo had built around himself when the enderman would willingly approach Sam and actively avoid the sheep woman.

They began conversing, Ranboo cracking jokes and references Sam didn't understand but laughed at anyway. It wasn't until the enderman had made another joke about his terrible memory that Sam quipped back that the teen should start keeping a notepad to keep him on track and remember stuff that Ranboo began to tell him about the memory book.

Ranboo explained how he's had it since he started to have his amnesiac spells, fearful that after losing memory of his parents and where he had come from that he would forget who he was. When Sam asked what his earliest memory was, Ranboo said he didn't know because the memory book had been tampered with, all of the pages of extensive notes and recollections gone, leaving only a smiley-face. Ranboo added that he couldn't even be sure if it was his real memory book, as it could've been replaced and stolen. But without a clear memory of exactly what his book looked like, the one he had in his possession was the memory book to him.

Sam couldn't even begin to imagine how the teen felt. Sam would go insane if he had to deal with even *half* of the enderman's issues, and from the way Ranboo spoke about it, fidgeting with his coat and his voice strained with anxiety, it would seem that the enderman had similar concerns.

The conversation didn't get much further from that point as Tubbo came barrelling down the docks, out of breath and mouth spewing out apologies. Ranboo and Sam were surprised by the sudden interruption, but before Sam could ask for Tubbo to give him a few more minutes with

Ranboo, the enderman was already questioning Tubbo about why he was so energetic. His nervous demeanor had completely shed from him, now replaced by excitement that matched Tubbo's.

The two hybrids quickly fell into conversation, and even though Sam had tried there was no pausing them, Tubbo already beginning to walk away from the docks as Ranboo closely followed. Sam trailed behind, his questions and thoughts bouncing loosely in his head while he kept a careful eye on the area around them. The group began to travel the unpaved forest, the quiet crunch of snow and contagious laughter of the teens echoing through the trees as Sam set aside his thoughts to focus on whatever topic Tubbo had dragged him into conversation with.

Sam had never forgotten about that conversation, though. He never forgot about Ranboo's memory book, or how important he said it was. How his face fell when he told Sam that it was all gone one day, and how he couldn't be sure about the book even being the original copy. Sam remembered the chill that ran down his spine when he heard that everything had been replaced by a single smiley-face, a white mask and green hoodie flashing in his mind. It was the latter detail that pushed him to march up to the prison after dropping off the two teens at Tommy's Hotel, going to Dream's cell and demanding to know what he had against Ranboo that made him do that.

When the masked man declared he had no idea what Sam was talking about, Sam could hardly keep himself from shoving the man into the lava wall. He was so utterly frustrated with Dream, from learning of Tommy's treatment in exile to the blatant manipulation of Tubbo, and now armed with this new information about Ranboo, Sam had almost every right and reason to end the man there and then.

But then, it would be too easy. Too quick. Dream was already suffering enough within the confined obsidian walls, and as much as most of the server wouldn't bat an eye to a mysterious death in the prison in which only Sam had access, that would be letting Dream win and Sam lose. By proving that Sam, the creeper-hybrid, wasn't as calm and cool and collected as he presented himself to be; that he could blow up in rage and be a cold-blooded killer, because then he could *really* live up to his heritage.

Sam wasn't that. He refused to be as such, because that would be stooping to Dream's level. Sam didn't prey on the weak and helpless or abuse his power to instill a fear within the denizens of the SMP. Sam wasn't Dream, and he planned to keep it that way.

As Sam left, he told Dream that he was going to comb through his bunker to see if they had missed anything. If the sudden tension in the prisoner's shoulders was anything to go by, there was bound to be *something* left behind after everyone had made out with their stolen belongings and pets. Dream confidently told him seconds later that he wouldn't find anything, and Sam left at that, not bothering to grace Dream with a response.

That's when, after hours of tearing down walls and breaking open the floor, he found the book. It was hidden beneath the large nether portal and packed tightly between some obsidian and stone, hidden so well that Sam almost admitted defeat so he could go home, as it was already late into the night and fatigue was running through every part of his body.

When Sam presented it to Ranboo the next time he saw him, the enderman flipped through a few of the pages and solemnly stated that it was *definitely* not his memory book. Confused, he asked if Ranboo could translate what it said. Ranboo did, reading off what seemed to be a list of items and instructions and after reading an incantation-like excerpt, it dawned on Sam that this was, indeed, no memory book.

This was the resurrection book.

The rest was history; he brought his findings to Puffy, then collaborated with Ranboo and her to figure out what they should do. They all eventually settled on reviving Wilbur after long weeks of extensive thought and deliberation, the decision being finalized after witnessing Tommy, Fundy and Tubbo visiting the L'Manberg crater together, leaving flowers in its center. It was well known that Wilbur was buried by Phil, although he never told anyone where because, in his words, "Wilbur would've wanted to rest, not to have people visiting him constantly."

Some of the items they needed were easily accessible; redstone dust, blaze powder, a Totem of Undying (Ranboo said Technoblade had given him one and was fine with departing from it, saying the piglin would just give him another while lecturing about how hard they were to get), and an item of the deceased. In Wilbur's case, it was his guitar's pick. And eventually, it was a branded, gold coin for Schlatt, who originally was supposed to stay dead; because why would the group bring back one of the server's greatest and most infamous *villains*?

That's when ConnorEatsPants got involved.

####

There was one item the group had no idea how to make or find themselves. However, Puffy knew who would definitely have a few.

Connor had built a reputation as a collector specializing in exotic wares after departing from Schlatt Co., and one of his specialties were things called *Eyes of Ender*. No one knew exactly what their purpose was or why they were so rare, but what was known was that Connor had quite a few. He was also known for being generous, offering more than what most requested or wanted; as long as he received something in return.

Once a businessman, always a businessman.

So, Sam and Puffy made the week-long journey to where Connor lived. Since he was not a resident of the SMP, the journey was long, but luckily wasn't very hard to find, his shop quite popular among travelers looking to return home with souvenirs. Puffy herself had visited quite a few times on her travels before settling in the SMP, which is why they knew what they needed to bring. Sam had brought some netherite ingots and Puffy brought some *Hearts of the Sea* she collected from her time as a pirate, wanting to be prepared for whatever Connor would ask of them.

What they definitely weren't prepared for was when the collector asked for *Schlatt* instead.

Apparently, Dream's bunker stunt had spread far beyond just the borders of the SMP, and many whispered about the resurrection book he spoke of that kept him from the clutches of the server's wrath. While many brushed it off as a tall tale spun by a desperate man and said those who believed him were idiots, Connor kept an open mind to the idea. He had heard of his former business partner's death a few weeks after it had happened, and couldn't help but feel guilty for not trying to reconcile with him before he kicked the bucket, so the idea of there being a book able to bring him back gave Connor enough hope that one day, maybe he'd get his chance for reconciliation..

It was just happen-stance that Sam and Puffy needed something from him, and that Connor had spent enough time analyzing people when he was in business to see that they had come prepared and with a purpose. Despite trying to seem like they weren't looking for anything in particular, they didn't travel so far with such high value goods just to *browse*. They piqued Connor's curiosity when they settled on his display case of *Ender Eyes*, so when they asked him if they could have one, Connor offered to give every last one to the hybrids; in exchange for knowing what they planned on doing with them.

If Schlatt taught Connor one thing, it was how to get what you wanted.

After what must've been half an hour of back and forth arguing, with Connor calling out Sam and Puffy's lies and the pair adamantly denying the claims, they all had reached a stand-still. Connor refused to hand over the eyes, and Sam and Puffy refused to give up the real reason they needed them. So, Connor switched his tactics, and told them they didn't need to tell them why they needed them anymore because he now had something else in mind. He asked if the resurrection book was real.

Connor's suspicions were confirmed as soon as the question left his mouth, both hybrids giving him a deer in the headlights kind of look and Puffy let out a small gasp.

That's when he demanded to be let in on the operation, or else the pair could kiss the eyes good-bye. They could keep their riches, he didn't need them. All he wanted was to revive Schlatt while they revived Wilbur. While initially against the idea, the pair begrudgingly agreed to his terms. They made him promise to take Schlatt with him, out and away from the SMP once he was revived, and Connor eagerly agreed.

As they returned to the DreamSMP, they filled Connor in about what had been going on recently, but Connor didn't really pay attention, too elated by the thought of his friend's return. Maybe then they could finally resolve their differences and things could go back to normal.

Connor shouldn't have been so naïve.

Puffy knelt down beside the trenchcoat wearing man, Wilbur as Sam had told her, setting down the clothes and first-aid kit next to her. He was definitely what Puffy had imagined when Sam described him to her; tall, eccentric, and with an aura about him that seemed to demand respect. Though in his current hacking fit, he was certainly lacking in the latter.

She opened the kit as Connor crouched next to the ram-horned man that sat adjacent to Wilbur, presumably Schlatt. She had heard a lot of stories about him; none of them good. But she wanted to give him a chance, so she handed a small water-bottle to Connor from the first-aid kit and then took one for herself, opening it and putting it in Wilbur's (uncomfortably) cold hands.

She patted his back gently with one hand while she guided his hand to his mouth, urging for him to take a sip which he did. He sputtered a few times, but eventually stopped coughing and quickly downed the water like it was the best thing he'd ever tasted. Looking over to Connor and Schlatt, they were in the same situation as her own, an empty water-bottle cast aside while Connor was talking fifty miles a minute, Schlatt looking like his brain was struggling to catch up as he breathed in deeply.

Wilbur wheezed something, but it was too quiet for her to hear as he coughed a few more times. Puffy grabbed one of the fluffy jackets she had in the pile of clothes and threw it around the Brit's shoulders, remembering his deadly cold hands.

"You shouldn't try to talk, it's gonna be a few hours before you can do anything more than walk and breathe," Puffy told him, looking him over for any injuries that should be patched up.

Wilbur cleared his throat, but that only made him begin to cough again. However, he was able to muster out a coherent sentence amongst his dry hacking.

"Where are Fundy and Tommy?"

Puffy's eyes narrowed in confusion before she answered. "They're fine. Listen, just try to relax-."

She was cut off by a shove as she toppled over, letting out a yelp as she made contact with the hard ground. She watched as Wilbur rose to his legs shakily, the jacket slipping off from his shoulders. Schlatt was quick to follow, Connor ceasing his rambling and abandoning the ram-hybrid's side to help Puffy up. She could've sworn she heard a hoarse apology slip from the Brit's mouth, but it was drowned out by Sam.

"Alright, let's not think about doing anything rash, guys," Sam slid his sword half-way out of its sheath that rested on his hip, a subtle threat that contrasted starkly against the leveled calm he spoke with. "You just got back. You're probably confused-."

"We're far from it, actually," Schlatt rasped out, clearing his throat afterwards. *"Where's Tubbo?"*

"Why, w-what could you want from him?" Ranboo spoke up, the first words Puffy has heard him speak since helping chant the incantations. It was heartwarming to see him getting defensive over his friend, though she did not like the tone the ram-hybrid replied with, boarding on a hiss if his voice wasn't so cracked.

“None of your goddamn business, that’s what.”

“Schlatt, Wilbur, if neither of you can calm down, you will not like what happens next,” Sam warned, now fully unsheathing his sword for it to glimmer in the slowly rising sun.

“We’ve died once. You aren’t that intimidating, Sam,” Wilbur stated, unamused. *“We just need to see them.”*

“You can,” Puffy interjected. “Just after we make sure you both aren’t gonna go and try to start a few more wars and set off more dynamite.”

“No time, we’ve been waiting for months. You can’t make us wait any longer,” Wilbur argued, taking a step back away from everyone. Sam matched him, taking a step forward with an ever-tightening grip on his sword.

“Hold on, what do you mean by ‘wait?’” Ranboo questioned.

“Since Tommy told me he was going to revive me, and that was a while ago now,” Wilbur took a few more steps back, and Sam advanced further. Schlatt continued to stand where he was, looking between Wilbur and Sam and around the crater. Puffy, Connor and Ranboo watched with bated breath, praying that this wasn’t going to end before it started. They knew that the two men had three lives again and would simply respawn back in the circle, but to lose one life within five minutes of returning to the land of the living wasn’t something they were hoping for. *“Sam, surely you understand?”*

“Wilbur, don’t do what I think you’re about to do.”

“What could that be, Sam?”

“We literally watched you and Schlatt fall over because you couldn’t keep balance, I doubt you could get farther than fifty feet,” Sam was pretty close to Wilbur now, who took yet another slow step back.

“Oh never Sam, why would we-?” Wilbur suddenly swiped his foot beneath Sam’s feet, tripping the creeper-hybrid before turning on his heel and running, stumbling every few steps at first before really picking up speed. Schlatt also darted off in a different direction than Wilbur, both getting a good head start.

“SORRY SAM!” The Brit yelled over his shoulder.

Sam groaned and jumped back to his feet, looking to Puffy and the group. “Puffy, with me. Connor and Ranboo, catch Schlatt before he gets too far.”

Connor and Ranboo nodded before racing after Schlatt, who was already starting to climb the crater’s walls. Puffy and Sam ran after Wilbur, who was making good ground on climbing out of the crater, about a third of the way up. Puffy would’ve admired his agility if he wasn’t currently running from them. Sam launched himself to the crater’s wall, quickly scaling and gaining on Wilbur. Puffy was still a bit below them, barely avoiding the small chunks of debris falling from the scrambling going on above her.

What caused her to stop climbing was the terrified screech of Ranboo. Looking across the crater,

she saw him jump down from where he was originally climbing. Connor fell shortly after as a surge of water came pouring down from a pocket of earth kicked away by Schlatt, washing away Connor as Ranboo booked it away from the water on the ground.

Sam too looked over in concern for the enderman, and that's when Wilbur took his chance, lowering down and kicking Sam in the head. Sam lost his grip on the wall and fell backwards, dazed from the blunt force and landing on the hard ground below with a thud. Puffy yelled out to Sam, dropping down carefully to the ground to make sure he was okay.

Puffy looked to Connor and Ranboo after checking over Sam, both luckily unharmed other than Connor being drenched in water and a small drop of water stinging Ranboo's cheek. Sam had a small bump on his head from the spot Wilbur kicked him at, but otherwise he was just knocked out by the force of the fall and would be awake after a few minutes. And by the time Puffy had looked back up to the crater walls, Wilbur was already gone and Schlatt was just rising to the crater's rim, walking away briskly and disappearing into the SMP.

This was *definitely* not how she thought things were going to go over.

###

Wilbur was not proud of causing violence within his first few moments back in life.

He still wobbled on his feet slightly as he jogged, the adrenaline that coursed through him back in the L'Manberg crater now completely gone and replaced with aching muscles and blistered hands. The sun rose slowly over the horizon, and Wilbur was tempted to take in its warm glow before remembering his task at hand: find his boys.

However, this proved to be a problem when everything was completely remodeled and renovated, and seeing as he had paid less attention to the surroundings than to Fundy or Tommy, Wilbur was utterly turned around. The Prime Path could've been a good place to start, but seeing as he was sure it was only a matter of minutes before the small group he and Schlatt thwarted would come looking for them, he opted to stay off the one road that had consistently stayed the same throughout his entire time being dead. He weaved through buildings and slunk along the shadows in the vast plains the main SMP was built upon.

Another problem that posed itself: Wilbur had little idea of exactly *where* the places his boys could be were. When he and Schlatt would enter the Overworld, they would have to imagine the place they wanted to be, or a person they wanted to watch over. The latter option was much easier for the former dead seeing as the SMP changed all the time, and they were more interested in the people anyways. That sentiment, while well-meaning, had come back to bite him, and most definitely Schlatt, in the ass.

Wilbur knew Fundy spent a lot of time either in Eret's Castle or around the Badlands, which would take Wilbur a hot second to find without the Prime Path to guide him. Tommy was spastic, his location different every time Wilbur had visited him, so there was no telling where the blonde teen would be at that moment. Wilbur could run into him for all his luck.

The sun climbed in the sky and grew brighter, the clear blue sky above beginning to turn cloudy, a humid feel in the air enough to indicate a rainstorm was coming. Wilbur couldn't remember the last time he felt rain, or water for that matter, on his skin. If it was anything like how the sun danced on his cold body, he could stand still and bask in a cold downpour for hours.

That water bottle the sheep woman had given him tasted like divine ambrosia, and he couldn't imagine what other foods and drinks would taste like after having gone so long without a need for food. In fact, everything in the Overworld felt one-hundred times stronger, sense-wise; colors seemed to pop and be brighter than what you'd normally expect, everything from the grass he trudged on to the colorful buildings that littered the SMP, wood even glowing in its own natural way. It felt like Wilbur had been given metaphorical contacts, because he had never seen the world this... vibrant, and full of life.

When he touched things, like the rough, rocky walls of the crater, he felt his hands tingle from the feeling of having something else other than soft clothing or hair or the blank void to touch, to tangibly feel. He could've melted at the sensation of finally being able to interact with the Overworld, even if it meant mildly injuring himself.

The smells of the SMP flooded his senses as soon as he had left the crater, taking comfort in the familiar ones and documenting the new ones in his mind to come back to later. It gave him a headache from how strong everything was, but the pain only filled him with more glee for being back in the living world.

Sounds seemed so much louder, the soft crunch of twigs and leaves making him look over this shoulder once in a while, afraid someone was walking behind him when he was completely alone. He could hear the winds picking up a bit, blowing wisps of greying hair from his face. Wilbur only noticed his change of appearance when he had passed by a window of a building, stopping abruptly to stare at his reflection and allow himself to be taken aback. His skin was turning tanner, more skin-colored than the drab grey he had arrived with, and his hair had lost most of its white and was replaced by an ever growing dark grey. White lingered on the ends of his hair for the most part, and a solid strip of hair down the middle had kept the snowy color. His eyes were beginning to lose the void look, hints of a pale hazel beginning to break through around his iris.

He continued on after taking in his reflection, happy that at least he wouldn't look *actually* dead for the rest of his time on the SMP.

Time crawled by, and by the time the sun had positioned itself above Wilbur before being shrouded in clouds, he was beginning to think he would never find what he was looking for. It felt like he had been walking in circles, and he could've sworn he had walked past the same building at least three times. At this rate, Sam and his group would find him, and then he really wouldn't stand a chance. He had the advantage of surprise in the crater, and with the unexpected distraction from Schlatt, Wilbur was able to keep his lead (even if he did feel bad about it afterwards). He had seen the way Sam interacted with Tommy and Tubbo, and he did genuinely appreciate the way the creeper-hybrid treated his teenage brother, especially after everything he'd been through, so of course it killed him a little bit on the inside when he kicked him down from the wall. Wilbur hoped the hybrid would just hold off on his revenge subduing a little longer.

Wilbur just wanted to see them, make sure they were okay. He didn't even need to speak to them, they didn't need to see him; he just needed peace of mind. He wasn't sure how long it had been since his final visit as a ghost, seeing as Afterlife time liked to be wonky and changed to keep Wilbur on his toes. It could've been weeks since he'd been back, or it could've been a few days. Either way, any amount of time was too long. Wilbur needed the cathartic relief of seeing them with his own two eyes. And undoubtedly, this time would be so much better than the times he's

had to look through the glass wall of the Afterlife, because he'd see them in the flesh and the utter vibrancy of the life the Overworld was hurling towards him at the moment.

Just when he had begun to lose hope of figuring out where he was while weaving through an oak forest and its trees, he exited the treeline and was greeted by the spectacle of a stone castle in the distance. Colored flags hung from its towers and one large one blew gently in the breeze in the center of the compound. A large, wooden drawbridge was lowered over a deep moat that surrounded the building, an open invitation to anyone who wanted to enter. The stone was perfectly chiseled and cemented, every brick meticulously placed with care and logic, each looking smooth to the touch, even from the distance Wilbur stood from. He could see the path leading up to the drawbridge and the beautiful flowers and shrubbery placed all around the castle, giving it even more of a proud appearance.

Eret's castle was breathtaking. Wilbur had seen it hundreds of times, but now that he really stopped to *admire* it, it was clear how much he had not paid any attention to the background noise as a ghost.

He was taken from his thoughts when he heard the distant sound of a *BOOM*. A flash of light erupted from the castle's center, a small trail of smoke billowing out of the top afterwards.

Now, this could've been anything, and it was likely to be Fundy's beloved hobby. Wilbur had seen Fundy experiment and invent multiple things in his time as a ghost, and has in turn seen that many times they end up blowing up in his son's face. A misplaced part, too much power, not enough redstone, *anything* could cause such a thing to happen. It was one of the things Wilbur had failed to see when he was alive before; that his son was incredibly imaginative, and really had a passion for anything and everything technical. Fundy wasn't afraid of failure for his inventions, and Wilbur had seen him gracefully take the loss of an invention not working out, tweak it, and try again. Even if that meant it would just blow back up in his face.

To Wilbur now, though, flashes of a button and the devastated land plagued by explosions, agonized faces of friends and family were branded in his mind while the haunting echoes of screaming and the smell of burnt earth and gunpowder filled his nose. The phantom feeling of blazing heat on his back and dust caking his skin only to enter his lungs. Utter terror filled Wilbur, the rational memories of Fundy's invention's failures slipped from his mind as he immediately assumed the worst case scenario. He moved faster than he ever did in the crater, tripping over himself multiple times as he skidded down a small hill and raced to the castle. His beanie had fallen off at some point, shrugged off by Wilbur's frantic movement, but he could care less.

'Fundy was hurt,' 'Fundy was seriously hurt and he needed to help him,' 'The explosions were his fault and now his son was hurt,' were the few thoughts that coursed through Wilbur's mind as he practically jumped on the drawbridge, running inside the castle. The inside wasn't much to comment on as Wilbur was running too fast to care, but he unconsciously registered the red carpet that masked his heavy footsteps and the lantern lined hallway he ran down, paintings covering the walls and beautiful drapes hanging from the high ceiling. Luckily for Wilbur, the castle was no maze. There was one hallway that led to everywhere from the throne room to the courtyard, which was where the explosion had originated from. Wilbur skidded to a halt as soon as he reached the entrance of the courtyard, panting heavily but not allowing himself to stop.

The area was bigger than you'd expect, with a few trees and well decorated ponds and flower beds planted everywhere along the walls. In the center was a forever maimed section of grass,

completely singed away by blasts and charred black from a recent one, smoke still wisping from the ground. A few metallic parts laid around the area, a turned over toolbox sitting nearby with screwdrivers and nails and hammers spilling out of it. A completely broken contraption laid next to the toolbox, springs and gear sticking out at weird angles while an extinguished redstone torch sat on top of it. It was about the size of a furnace, so its explosion being as prominent as it was only caused Wilbur to worry more.

However, it was the sight of a long-lost son that made Wilbur's heart flutter with joy. Fundy stood with his back towards Wilbur, standing next to his tools with a book in hand, scribbling things in it with a pen. He wore what he had always worn; a black jacket with a high collar and golden handcuffs, and even though Wilbur couldn't see the front of him he knew that the jacket also had a small part of the coat with blocks of pastel color along the edges. He could see the ends of a white shirt poking from beneath the jacket, and the hat Fundy always wore was lopsided by the slightest, fox ears poking out from holes made in the hat by Tommy after Fundy had complained constantly about his ears cramping beneath it. He also wore the same pair of black jeans he always had, a bushy fox tail swaying lightly behind him while he looked over whatever was in that book. He was a fox-hybrid through and through, though he was much more animal looking than Sam or Schlatt, who more or less took on smaller traits of their hybrid half.

Wilbur didn't realize exactly how heavily he was panting from exertion (and a bit from anxiety), because Fundy's ears flicked back and he turned on his heel to face Wilbur.

“Is that you, Eret-?”

Fundy's brown eyes widened and he dropped the book in his hands, landing with a nearly inaudible thud as he gaped at the sight before him. Wilbur saw how his face, snout and most of his upper body was caked with soot from the explosion. He obviously did not stand back far enough to observe. His steam-punk goggles hung loosely around his neck, Wilbur noticing the circles around his son's eyes that had not been dirtied by the ash that stained his fur. His white shirt was too stained, as was his jacket and clawed paws that served as his hands. Wilbur usually would've chuckled at how ridiculous he looked, but all that filled his mind was that Fundy was *still* hurt in some capacity and anxiety ran through his bloodstream.

Wilbur didn't hesitate to jog to where Fundy stood still in shock, not thinking of the fact that this was definitely bizarre and unreal for the fox-hybrid who watched Wilbur die all those months ago and was now suddenly back in front of him, his appearance now a bit ghoulish and a petrified look on his face. Once Wilbur was in front of him, he worriedly checked him over, trying to find *something* that would justify his surge of anxiety for his son. Even when he didn't find anything, he still gave Fundy a double-glance, tilting his son's head with his hands to really give a good inspection. This is what snapped Fundy from his frozen stance, grabbing Wilbur's wrists and lowering them, both of them staring at each other. Wilbur could feel the way Fundy's paws shook, and it didn't help that Wilbur's did the same.

There was no deciphering the emotions that clouded Fundy's face, too many flickering in and out like a dying flame in his eyes. He opened and closed his mouth like he was trying to find words that could somehow make sense of the person that was standing before him.

Wilbur's panic died away as rationale returned to his senses, realizing quickly what he had done as his eyes dragged over to the broken machine that sat beside Fundy. He completely forgot about his son's volatile past-time, and now he had made things a little bit more complicated for the both of

them.

The air between father and son was silent, both unable to conjure the words that could accurately depict the situation they were in.

Wilbur was alive, wearing the same clothes with the stains and rips from when he had died, and even though he had a ghostly resemblance, he was completely corporeal and tangible in Fundy's paws. And instead of the former president's eyes looking at Fundy with scorn, they were full of the paternal love that Wilbur had always shown him before the Election. What also accompanied that was the tearful look of remorse, whether for barging in to fret over Fundy for an unlikely reason Wilbur had foolishly convinced himself with, or for everything else he had done wrong before he died, it wouldn't be clear until Wilbur would explain himself.

What broke the silence wasn't words. Instead, after a few minutes of tense bewilderment, Fundy dropped Wilbur's wrists and threw his arms around his torso, hugging him so tightly it nearly winded Wilbur. Wilbur only took a few seconds of processing before he too had his arms around Fundy, trying his best to match Fundy's grip even though his body was still weakened by the lost adrenaline that filled him minutes prior. A rush of emotions hit Wilbur all at once, ranging from joy to grief to shame to zeal for getting to hug his son after what had felt like years. It was overwhelming, but Wilbur assumed it must also be for Fundy too after he heard the fox-hybrid quietly sniffing into his shoulder, which was all Wilbur could really register other than the smell of ash that still coated his son's soft fur.

Wilbur's words were what really broke the dam to both his own and Fundy's waterworks, voice cracking as his grip on his son only tightened to reassure the both of them that he was real; that what was happening at the moment was reality and not just a dream.

"I'm sorry, Fundy."

It wouldn't fix everything.

Things were **far** from being okay.

Words couldn't even begin to undo what Wilbur had created and done and *neglected*, but in this moment, all they needed was each other;

Something they had gone far too long without.

####

Schlatt cursed himself after the fifth time he had walked past the White House.

Unlike Wilbur, Schlatt took to the Prime Path to find where he was going, which was SnowChester. It was the only place he knew Tubbo could be. The problem was: there were no goddamn directories anywhere. The one thing this godforsaken SMP could use for the amount of buildings and different lands within it, and they hadn't thought to do it yet. There were also two other prominent reasons Schlatt was frustrated with his lack of direction:

One was that when he was previously alive, he never left the confines of Manberg's borders. He rarely left the White House for that matter, usually drinking himself to oblivion in his office or sleeping away a hangover wherever his body would find itself when his energy depleted. He didn't travel because his domain is where he held power, and he refused to let himself lose any ounce of that power even for a minute outside of the country *he* controlled.

The second was because, after Manberg had been blown up the third and final time, Tubbo didn't stay anywhere near the central part of the SMP (beside the time he and Tommy had gone to face Dream, though Schlatt chose to shove that particular memory to the back of his mind for the time being). That's the reason the teen had built SnowChester, or at least from what Schlatt could assume to be the reason; it was so he could be as far from Manberg as possible. So, anytime Schlatt would visit after the final war, he'd be in SnowChester with Tubbo, watching him make nukes with Jack and build up his small community. And while Schlatt was glad, relieved even, that the teen had enough emotional-awareness that the home he once knew was too painful to stay near after all the traumatic experiences and scars he had gained, physically and mentally; he really wished the kid had built an obvious road to the town.

He was on his toes, however. He knew that there would be trouble if anyone saw him, *especially* anyone who was involved in the Manberg vs. PogTopia conflict (which was pretty much the entire population of the SMP). So, anytime he'd hear or see someone coming, he'd duck between buildings or hide in the first place he could find. Luckily, it had only happened a few times, though the one time he heard the confident, loud-mouthed voice of Wilbur's brother walking past with Jack, who would reply to Tommy in a cheerful tone that Schlatt knew was fake. He was tempted to stop the both of them, intimidate Jack into running and tell Tommy not to trust him, but he knew exposing himself to anyone but Tubbo first would only cause panic and unwanted attention, so he let them go past without incident.

And it would seem that he wouldn't have even needed to do that, as when he poked his head out to watch them walk away, he saw a tall man walking behind the two dressed with a hard hat and bright builder's vest, carrying a sword on his back.

"Sam Nook," As Wilbur had told him once while they hung around in the Afterlife together. *"I think it's a robot, NPC-like thing Sam made for Tommy. It's pretty realistic and looks a lot like Sam, hence the name. It builds Tommy's hotel and also as a body-guard when needed, like an extra set of eyes for Sam when he can't hang with Tommy. It speaks in jumbled noises, but text shows up holographically on the vest for people to read. I think it's supposed to replicate a game Tommy plays, Animal Walking. Something along those lines. Pretty nifty, right?"*

Schlatt did agree, and was grateful that he wouldn't need to worry for Tommy at the moment.

What he did need to worry about, however, was how the *hell* he would be able to get to Tubbo before Connor and the rest of them would find him.

He wasn't sure how Connor had gotten himself wrapped up in this whole resurrection business; hell, he wasn't sure *why*. They left each other with venom in their voices and hatred in their blood, the once amiable rapport they had with each other soured and torn apart by the pressure of a failing business, depleting funds and Schlatt's beginning alcohol problem. Connor had no reason to be by his side as Schlatt coughed the plague from his dry lungs and throat, or to show him kindness and talk to him excitedly, like he was *happy* to see Schlatt. It simply made no sense to Schlatt, and as much as he wanted to dissect Connor's reasons, the ram-hybrid didn't have the luxury of time when Sam told him and Wilbur that they had to wait before they could see the people they were desperate to check on.

He felt bad when he kicked away the piece of dirt that was holding back a small pocket of water that had collected, as it splashed all over Connor and caused him to fall down. That certainly wasn't a good first interaction with his old business partner, but a small part of him felt smug about it. He pushed that feeling away. Their feud was before. Schlatt could make good with Connor in this life; just as soon as he accomplished a few of his goals first.

He also grew concerned for a second when the bi-colored hybrid had screamed at the sight of water. A drop had touched his face before he jumped to safety, and Schlatt winced when he heard the sharp sizzle of what sounded like hot oil making contact with skin. He then put together the pieces that the lanky and tall teen must be half-Enderman. Past Schlatt would've been gloating at accidentally exploiting the convenient weakness of the hybrid, as it gave both him and Wilbur more time to get away. But that version of Schlatt didn't have a moral code, didn't have access to the empathy current Schlatt had. Sure, he was still a little grateful that it was a good enough distraction, but he made a mental note to apologize to the hybrid: both for being rude when he had asked a just question, and for sending the one thing that could really harm him pouring down on him.

Now that he really thought about it, that could've been the 'Ranboo' Tubbo talked about sometimes. Schlatt himself had never been around when Tubbo was with Ranboo, but he knew he at least *existed* because of how much Tubbo would talk about him to Jack. It was just as much as he would talk about Tommy, though Schlatt usually would tune out once Tubbo had begun to get repetitive with either individual. Besides, Schlatt liked the other things Tubbo would talk about, like bees, or a baby zombie-piglin he would tote around Snowchester named Michael, or nuclear physics.

... Maybe not nuclear physics, but Tubbo sure sounded educated when he rambled on about it.

He sighed and stood on the stairs of the White House, running his hands down his face before looking around. Not much around this area had changed, and for a moment Schlatt could almost imagine hearing the shrieking laughter of Quackity or the gentle humming of Fundy, though he knew it was all in his head. He gazed reminiscently at the building's exterior, its once prideful and empowering presence was now replaced with a sad and broken atmosphere. This place, once his home, looked like it hadn't been touched in months, vines growing along the sides of the building and weeds having sprouted in the previously taken-care-of flower beds. The marble that made up the entire building, which was once sparkling white, had become a dirtied and cracking grayish color from neglect. There was also graffiti all over, from 'FUCK MANBERG' to 'ALL HAIL THE EGGPIRE' to various arts of some guy in clout goggles in varying degrees of ridiculousness. The windows that had always been spotlessly clear had become dusty and fogged, unable to look into the dark rooms they were attached to, which were probably full of cobwebs and rotting with mold

or bugs. It probably still smelled faintly of whiskey and cigar smoke, because no matter how many air fresheners his cabinet put in, there was no getting rid of the smell of either. He wondered if his secret stash of booze was still inside beneath the kitchen's floorboards, but he pushed that away as quickly as it had come.

'No more booze,' He promised himself in his mind. He shivered at the memory of his post-death detox, a rather convincing reason not to pursue any kind of temptation in this new life he was gifted.

He was here to amend, not fall back into old habits.

“Hello!”

Schlatt jumped, which was not a great impulse as he lost balance and fell backwards, letting out a short string of curses before hitting the ground with a *thump*. He was lucky that he was only on the first set of stairs and that everyone had let the path leading to the White House become overgrown, as the grass he landed in cushioned the brunt impact of his fall. Still, it was not pleasant and Schlatt groaned in displeasure.

“Oh no! Are you okay dude?!” A... man (?) appeared above Schlatt, looking down at him. The man was a shiny gold color, with literal green orbs that looked to be eyes and had a somewhat big nose, almost like a villager's but slightly less obnoxious. He had on a hat depicting a shark's mouth, which brought Schlatt to his next observation: the man didn't have a mouth. How he was talking, Schlatt wouldn't understand. He didn't have eyebrows either, but his face still creased like a regular face would with concern as he held out a hand to help Schlatt up.

Schlatt hesitated before taking the hand, swallowing his pride as he was helped to his feet. Once upright again, he got a better look at the very odd being. He had gloves that matched the shark hat, but that wasn't the thing that caught Schlatt's attention. This guy wore rather warm clothing considering the weather, which was pretty breezy but not *cold* like how he was dressed for. The fur-lined vest he had on was over a brown and beige flannel, with fur boots and brown snow-pants to top off the snug look. The outfit looked so similar to Tubbo's, and it only took Schlatt a minute or so to piece together the clues that this being must be a resident of SnowChester.

A GPS had just landed at Schlatt's feet. Or rather, he fell at its boots.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. What were you doing, though? This building isn't nearly as interesting as some of the others here!” The golden man questioned, and Schlatt could hear the grin in his voice. It still made Schlatt uneasy that this being had no mouth and was still somehow speaking, but he tried to shake away the feeling as he formulated a quick plan in his mind.

“I dunno, I was just, uh... Sight-seeing?” Schlatt hated how he sounded unsure, but it obviously didn't make the being before him confused, because he continued on with the same chipper tone.

“Oh, are you a visitor? I was gonna say, I've never seen you around before,” He extended a hand, inviting Schlatt to shake. “I'm Foolish G., but I just go by Foolish.”

Schlatt took his hand and shook it firmly, the action instinctive from his time as a businessman. Quickly, he chose a name to lie with, not all convinced that this obviously newer resident hadn't at least heard a thing or two about Schlatt. And luckily, lying was also a great skill he had mastered from being a businessman.

"My name is Jebediah."

"Welcome to the DreamSMP, Jeb!" Foolish replied, releasing Schlatt's hand and gesturing around. He looked to Schlatt again. "Can I call you Jeb?"

"I could really care less, bud," Schlatt shrugged before conjuring an uninterested look on his face, pretty much lying through his teeth. "Listen, this place is pretty cool and all, but I'm honestly kinda disappointed."

The golden man's face fell. "Really?"

"Yeah, I was kinda expecting more, uhm, I dunno... *variety*."

"Variety?"

"Yeah, more so in areas I suppose. I've heard the history of this place, and other than that giant fucking crater it's pretty standard. No real difference in weather or biome, and everything is so packed together that I can't tell where one provenance starts and where one ends."

Schlatt purposely chose the buzz words that he hoped would give him the response he needed. He would look pretty weird to ask where a specific town that was pretty secluded from the rest of the SMP was. He doubted anyone out of the SMP even *knew* about SnowChester, more focused on the nations at war like it was Saturday morning cartoons. He had to be subtle.

"Oh, do you live in a particular biome back home?"

Goddamn it.

"Uh, yeah. I'm half-ram, so I've lived in the mountains where it snows a lot. Pretty cold there, so I was hoping there would be a place that could, um, remind me of home, since I've been away for so long," Schlatt fibbed, trying to steer the conversation where he needed it to go.

"I was wondering why your hands were so cold! Is that why you look so odd? Wait, no, that came out wrong, I-"

Schlatt was starting to lose hope that this guy could be of any help to him.

"- your horns are super cool, not weird!" Foolish finished fixing his accidental insult.

"It's fine, I get it a lot," Schlatt sighed.

"Well you shouldn't! Honestly you look pretty intimidating, so I don't know why anyone would-."

“Hey, let’s get back on topic! No need to talk about me anymore, please,” Schlatt interrupted, keeping his voice level-toned even as he was growing annoyed.

“Oh, sorry, Jeb,” Foolish chuckled awkwardly. Then, Schlatt could almost see the lightbulb go off in Foolish’s head, green orbs (he knew they were eyes, but resembled gemstones too closely for him to call them ‘eyes’) somehow widening and Schlatt knew if he had a mouth, the golden man would be grinning.

“Hey, have you ever heard of SnowChester?”

Schlatt grinned inwardly.

“No, actually, I haven’t. What is it?”

Whatever happened when he reached the town, Schlatt wasn’t worried about. However, the thought of seeing Tubbo for the first time since being an invisible ghost, now unable to hide behind the veil of anonymity and armed with the knowledge and things he’s seen, he was surprised when it wasn’t excitement or delight like how he had expressed to Wilbur privately in the Afterlife.

Instead, his stomach churned with uncertainty that this was the right thing to do for either of them.

####

Sam was beginning to regret this as he combed the area around the L’Manberg crater, checking every building and cranny that Schlatt could be hiding in.

The group had split into pairs, Sam and Connor together to search for Schlatt while Ranboo and Puffy went to look for Wilbur. He didn’t like the idea of the enderman-hybrid being near either of the revived men, but it was better for it to be Wilbur than Schlatt, and he was at least with Puffy. Connor was a good asset for helping getting Schlatt to listen, but was pretty weak when it came to fighting. And if it came down to it, Sam was better off with the collector than with Ranboo or Puffy, who could at least fight decently.

He really hoped that whatever either of them wanted from Tommy, Tubbo and Fundy, it wasn’t harmful. He wanted to believe for, at least Wilbur, their intentions were good. It’s also why Sam was looking for Schlatt and not Wilbur: he didn’t trust that ram to be around anyone, *especially* Tubbo, for five seconds.

Sam at least took solace that the ram-hybrid didn’t know that SnowChester existed, or that’s where Tubbo lived. It was only a matter of time before he and Connor found him aimlessly wandering

around and wrangled him back to Sam's house, which is where they all planned to keep them until they were sure they weren't threats.

After all, everyone on the server had pretty much been involved in the Manberg vs. PogTopia war, so even if Schlatt was *foolish* enough to walk up to someone to ask for directions, he'd probably be met with a sword, screaming, or both.

Right?

Chapter End Notes

i have made a spotify playlist for this book. its official. this is my life now. writing for this hellhole. /j

expect every chapter to range anywhere from 4000 to 10000 words, if it dips below or above that; worry about my sanity. /hj

anyways, here's a discord server i run, there's a bunch of small streamers there you should definitely take a look at! we also have made our own SMP and there is a story being developed :3. I personally cannot stream, but I do play a character in it and record my footage instead! however there are a bunch of streamers who do stream it, so you should definitely take a look at their channels if you get the chance!! join if you're interested and see y'all in the next chapter!

discord link: <https://discord.gg/dWyzFNggVg>

It's A New Night

Chapter Notes

To clarify the ages of everyone (IN THIS BOOK, because in canon its too complicated), since wilbur's part will dive into the past a bit:

Tommy, Ranboo and Tubbo - 17

Fundy and Jack - 19

Wilbur, Eret and Connor - 24

Schlatt - 26

Techno, Sam and Puffy - 25

Phil - Very, very old. That's all I'm saying

Quackity - 21

Foolish and Niki - 22

i hope you all enjoy, this chapter is nearly 15,000 words long!

TW Warning for: Referenced Suicide Attempt and Flashbacks

edit 3/15/21: minor edits, grammar fixes

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Neither Wilbur nor Fundy realized how long they had stood there embracing each other, the quiet air around them only broken by sniveling and blubbered apologies that usually didn't make any coherent sense. It didn't matter to them, of course, because why would either of them worry about it? It had been months, maybe even a year or longer since they've really had a tender moment like this; no war or conflict to bar them from their emotions or strain their relationship more than it was already, just them and the peaceful ambience of the castle's courtyard. It reminded Wilbur of L'Manburg before he had even thought of the land becoming a nation: simple, yet it had a beautiful serenity that screamed to Wilbur that the land was meant for him and his small family he had.

In fact, the reason he knew the land L'Manburg was would be where they would settle was *because* of Fundy.

When Wilbur, Tommy and Tubbo left home, Wilbur was 18, and Tommy and Tubbo were both 11 (Phil was originally against Wilbur taking the two younger boys, but as soon as Wilbur had snapped at Phil for being gone all the time, Phil didn't put up any more resistance to Wilbur's decision). Tommy and Tubbo were completely overjoyed at the idea of getting to go explore the world, and Wilbur at the time was just ready to prove to his father that he *was* something.

It had taken about a year until they finally landed themselves in the DreamSMP, a ghost town of a land with only a few builds and mostly unpopulated other than by Dream and his gang. Dream had

given Wilbur and his two younger companions temporary citizenship, because he hadn't planned on staying. Instead, Wilbur planned to follow Schlatt to where he had a business and hopefully find a place there to begin making something of himself.

Wilbur had met Schlatt in an alley of all places. Wilbur had left Tommy and Tubbo in a nearby inn while he ventured out to make a quick buck, playing guitar on a street corner pretty much all day when the ram had literally appeared out of the shadows, flipping a golden coin and asking Wilbur if he was interested in investing. When Wilbur denied, Schlatt pressed on, persistent and not leaving Wilbur alone. After long bargaining consisting of Wilbur denying the ram and Schlatt not letting up on the benefits in investing, Wilbur forked over a few dollars out of the measly thirty he had earned that day. Schlatt, pleased with the outcome, then handed Wilbur the coin he had been flipping, telling him he wouldn't regret it. But before the ram had meant to leave and Wilbur returned to the hotel, Tommy and Tubbo came barreling down the sidewalk towards them, telling Wilbur that he was taking too long and that they had gotten locked out of their room. Wilbur playfully scolded them and gave them his spare keycard before they ran back in the direction of the inn, and when he turned back to continue packing up his things, he was amazed to find a \$50 bill and the few dollars he had given Schlatt returned into his guitar case, the ram-hybrid completely vanished from sight.

Wilbur used the golden coin Schlatt had given him to locate the business and had tried to send back the \$50 the next day out of guilt and not wanting to be pitied, but was met with direct refusal from Schlatt, who insisted Wilbur just take it and never talk about it. And this here was the start of their friendship. The ram-hybrid was very helpful along their travels, providing Wilbur tips on the cheapest places to bunker down or easy-to-haggle traders, and Wilbur genuinely enjoyed the ram's perfectly-timed (albeit sometimes controversial) humor.

Surprisingly enough too, the boys took great liking to Schlatt as well, bouncing off the walls and practically hanging off the ram-hybrid when he would visit. Tommy seemed to hold him in the same high regard as did Technoblade, Wilbur catching onto the blonde's mock attempts to replicate the same dry humor as Schlatt; though most of the time, at least when he was still young, it would fall short of being funny. Tubbo was much more subtle of his interest in the businessman, but it was obvious to Wilbur when Tubbo would ask him questions about things Schlatt regularly spoke about, like taxes or cryptocurrency. This is why it felt so painful when Schlatt exiled him and Tommy almost four years later.

He had been a great friend for Wilbur, who sometimes barely had enough in his pockets to keep his trio fed.

They had stayed in the SMP for about three months at that point, Wilbur still trying to earn enough funds to be able to buy at least a sizable house and plot of land where Schlatt was living, while also providing for two very quickly growing children. Tommy was quietly literally sprouting up, and Wilbur didn't even imagine how much he would grow when he was a teenager. Tubbo, on the other hand, was growing regularly, but still ate just as much as Tommy. Wilbur had contemplated starting a garden just so he didn't have to buy so much food all the time. They could hunt, sure, but one cow or sheep would last them maybe a week or two, and neither Tommy nor Tubbo enjoyed eating one thing every day. And, rather than face the rage of two eleven year olds who knew where he slept, he tried to make dinner different every few nights. Wilbur was just ready to get out of the untamed land of the DreamSMP and somewhere more civilized.

However, it was on one particularly stormy night that changed things.

####

It was insane outside the caravan Wilbur had scraped enough together to buy for himself and the boys. Thunder seemingly shook the very earth with explosive noise, and lightning crackled outside, lighting up the world in blinding flashes before returning to the uninviting darkness that filled the wilderness that surrounded the caravan. Rain pelted the metal of the vehicle like bullets in a warzone, too loud for Wilbur to fall asleep to. Luckily, he had found some noise-cancelling earphones for Tommy and Tubbo, so they were both sound asleep in the bunk beds that came with the caravan.

Wilbur was sitting on the couch/dining booth, reading a book by flashlight so as to not wake the boys. He didn't really care for what was in it, most of it boring history that he had thought was interesting after listening to the musical 'Hamilton', and he was unpleasantly disappointed with all the filler that almost overshadowed the best bits: the wars. Wilbur sometimes fantasized the idea of being in one, the glorious battles and triumphing greatly over his imagined enemies. But that's all they were, fantasies, and Wilbur accepted that fact. He still had no idea what he wanted to do with his life, what he would do to make Phil appreciate him, so he tried to keep his day-dreaming to a minimum most of the time.

Lighting flashed again and thunder roared outside, the caravan groaning as a strong gust of wind careened into the side of the caravan and caused it to lean. Wilbur tensed, afraid the vehicle was going to fall over as he readied himself to run to the aid of his brothers.

Luckily, the caravan settled back down, and Wilbur tried to relax as another flash of lighting lit up the caravan like a disco, the thunder accompanying the lightshow with bass that continued to rattle the vehicle.

It was very late into the night, around one or two in the morning, when the hellstorm began to die away finally. The rain became less pounding and instead pitter-pattered against the windows, the thunder became more like soft drum beats as they moved away and the lightning disappeared completely, leaving the caravan shrouded in a blanket of pitch-black. He could barely tell where the windows were if not for the small lantern outside that hung above the door leading into the van, the fluorescent light casting a dim orange onto the water droplets that ran down the glass.

*Wilbur yawned and stretched, placing down his book on the couch's cushion beside him. Finally, it would at least be attemptable to catch a few hours of sleep before the boys would wake him up. By then, they'd be bouncing off the walls and hungry, and Wilbur wouldn't catch a break until at least early afternoon when they'd run off to do some light exploring. He trusted them a lot more than Phil did, Wilbur giving them weapons and making them promise to be back by sunset. Phil was always weird about allowing them out into the wilderness that surrounded their childhood home, only allowing small trips that he **had** to be accompanying with, and only ever letting them fight mobs that Phil had already weakened. Of course, this was mainly whenever Phil was home for any significant amount of time; which was never.*

Wilbur wasn't as overbearing, knowing Tommy and Tubbo were a lot tougher than they looked. Tommy had actually beaten Wilbur in multiple spars, the child so quick and unpredictable that

Wilbur wasn't able to keep up. He could faintly see the techniques Techno used whenever the piglin sparred, so Wilbur was glad his older brother was at least helpful in some regard for his little brother's prowess.

It only stung Wilbur a little when Tommy said he wanted to be just as great as Techno. The blonde didn't know that it would pain him, and Wilbur refused to hold it against Tommy's child-like awe of the piglin. Of course an eleven year old would find Techno to be cool, after all, the piglin even had a well-known nickname now, even at the young age of 20.

'The Blood God'

Wilbur thought it pretentious. It didn't help his opinion when he'd see pictures and art of his brother in a crown and royal red cape, the top of a skeleton horse's head masking his pig-like features but just falling short of covering the intimidatingly sharp tusks that protruded from his brother's mouth. He'd be standing there or in the midst of a battle, Philza sometimes with him dressed in netherite armor and large gray wings stretched out in all their glorified glory.

He usually would crumple the pictures, burning them in the campfire or with a lighter if Tommy or Tubbo hadn't seen them yet. The boys liked to keep the pictures in a scrapbook they wanted to, eventually, send to their father and brother, with all their memories they made on their adventures catalogued and there for Phil and Techno to see. They both said it was so that they knew Wilbur and them were still thinking about their distant family, even though they were having a lot of fun.

Not that either would be impressed, Wilbur knew. They had seen much cooler things than what they had; they probably wouldn't even read the first three pages.

(Still, Wilbur loved that scrapbook. He was elated to have found it unharmed after the first destruction of L'Manburg. He then kept it close throughout his Presidency, and during exile, it was a small break in the growing disease of insanity. He had left it in PogTopia, and when he returned to the old and abandoned ravine once as a ghost, it was gone from where he had always kept it. Wilbur wept that day. All the memories and pictures were gone and Wilbur knew then he had lost the one thing that held some of the best and happiest memories he's ever had. It was dumb to mourn over something so materialistic, yet he knew that the nostalgia and sentiment of that stupid book is what had gotten him through some of his roughest, darkest moments. Still, life had to continue, and soon Wilbur had pushed back the memory of the book as he watched Tommy's exile unfold and Fundy's wedding get ruined.)

He stood and carefully navigated his way to the back of the van, feeling his way through the tight hallway that also held the boy's bunks, the beds built into the wall like little caves. Wilbur tiredly noted the soft snoring of Tubbo, which quite literally sounded like a mooing cow, and Tommy's ever restless tossing and turning (Wilbur had many bruises when Tommy was younger and refused to sleep alone, the kid practically fist-fighting sleep every night). He knew he could probably stomp and they wouldn't hear him with the headphones on, but he still had the instinct to be quiet.

He felt the soft curtain that obscured the back of the van and quietly moved it to enter where his room was. It was small and cramped, the bed taking up three-fourths of the space with only a

small closet to store clothes in and a pull-out desk he would work at while the kids were out and about. Along the back wall and head of the bed were windows, with small ledges where Wilbur had placed the few miscellaneous items, such as a framed gold coin given to him by Schlatt, and a small vase of succulents given to him by a woman named Nihachu. She moved to the SMP a few days prior and introduced herself to Wilbur and the boys, and, feeling guilty for not being able to give her anything, Wilbur insisted that she stay for dinner. They clicked pretty quickly, and now she came by at least once a day to at least say hi to Wilbur.

But putting the vase of succulents aside, Wilbur cursed himself when he noticed that the one of the windows were cracked open, and therefore water had gathered on the ledge and ran off into the bed. Groaning at his luck, he moved as quickly as he could without making too much noise to the window, clambering across the bed and closing the window. He felt his knee sink into a wet spot of the bed and cringed, quickly getting off the bed to dust off his sweatpants.

He left his room to the kitchen, grabbing a roll of paper towels and returning back to the room with them. He closed the curtain, and knowing that light would be helpful in this situation, he felt around the wall until his finger felt the cool plastic, flipping the switch and blinking away the sting the sudden brightness caused to his eyes.

Once his vision had adjusted, he quickly realized that a water leak wasn't the only thing he was going to have to worry about, as dry mud prints were all over Wilbur's bedspread, blankets missing and so was the one pillow that had a pillowcase on it.

They had been robbed; or, more so Wilbur had been robbed.

He dropped the paper towels and rushed out to the area he had been sitting before, reaching above the couch and to the wall which held Wilbur's sword. Even now, it glimmered in its enchanted hue, and the beautiful turquoise was able to be seen dimly in the low light of the caravan. The sword had been a gift from Phil before he left home, and as much as he wanted to sell it off or throw it in a river, he had to admit the weapon was formidable, even in his hands.

Taking the sword and creeping back to the room, he carefully checked the bathroom and the boy's bunks for any sign of unwanted guests or remnants of his stolen goods. After finding nothing, he entered his room, using the sword to open the curtain and closing it behind him with his free hand. Wilbur looked over his room and bed with scrutiny, trying to decipher if the mud trail led back outside or stayed inside. Wilbur hoped it wasn't the latter, but that hope was diminished when looking to his closet and seeing one of his stolen blankets poking out beneath the crack of the door.

Whatever was in there was about to get a nasty awakening.

Wilbur hoped it wasn't a spider as he drew close to the door, grip on his sword tightening as he slowly reached out for the closet door's handle. He'd have to move quickly, because he couldn't risk any close-quarters combat. He wasn't very good at it, more suited for long-distance fighting, but what he was really best at was strategy and planning. Wilbur wasn't a fighter, but he didn't know what else he could be in this situation. Something had broken in, and whatever it was, it

probably was not friendly, and it would probably try to eat Wilbur or the boys if he didn't deal with it now.

He took hold of the knob on the door and took a deep breath, psyching himself up internally. Then, without warning, he threw open the door and raised his sword to strike whatever lay inside.

His adrenaline faltered when he was met with not the red, beady eyes of a spider, but rather the cocooned and curled up lump of a fox.

The stolen blankets were wrapped snugly around the fox, who was curled in a fetal position and fast asleep, head resting on the missing pillow which leaned against the wall. It certainly did not look the most comfortable, from the cramped space to the hung up shirts and pants dangling above, but somehow the creature made it work. The fox itself looked like it had been in the storm, orange fur still visibly damp and messy and the blankets stained with mud, probably from the its paws. Their ears flicked periodically, and short, black whiskers twitched every time the blankets would brush past them.

Though what perplexed Wilbur was the fact the fox wore a hat, or at least had on a hat, the item having slipped from the creature's head a bit and laid half-way on the blankets, slowly rising and falling with the fox's breathing. In fact, now that Wilbur had lowered his sword and really inspected the fox, he could tell how young the fox seemed, yet it had to be the size of Tubbo, judging by how much space it took in the closet. Wilbur also noticed how odd the sleeping position would be for a regular fox, and was actually much more suited for a humanoid being than animal.

Before Wilbur could observe further detail, the eyes of the fox opened suddenly, brown meeting chocolate as they locked eye-contact.

Wilbur knew what it looked like to the fox: a large man was holding a very scary looking sword and standing practically above them after they had broken into his home and holed up in his closet with all of his blankets, dragging mud in during the process. Of course it would be terrifying to wake up to.

It's just that Wilbur wasn't expecting the fox to screech, the horrible sound grating against his eardrums and causing him to jump back in surprise. It was definitely animal in nature, but the way the fox scrambled upwards and pressed against the wall of the closet was definitely human, especially when the fox threw off most of the blankets and revealed a wrinkled, dirty white shirt and paws with an extra toe that looked like an opposable thumb. Their eyes were also more human than animal, widening in terror as they continued to scream.

Quickly, Wilbur discarded his sword on the bed and held up his empty hands, looking at the fox with as much calmness as he could muster against the flustered feeling this situation was giving him.

"Wait, wait, wait, stop! No need to scream, I'm friendly!" He pleaded over the screeching of the fox. It caused the fox to cease, and that relieved Wilbur as the ringing in his ears died away. He really hoped those noise-cancelling headphones were good, or else Wilbur was going to have to

deal with more than just a terrified fox-hybrid, as Wilbur had concluded by the human-like features the fox possessed. "See? No need to screech, although that's one hell of a voice you got there."

The fox-hybrid didn't say anything in response, instead they kept staring at Wilbur like he was going to jump at them at any second, body tensed and gripping the remaining blankets that hadn't fallen to the floor tightly. Wilbur saw their claws digging into the cloth, and he prayed that they weren't sharp enough to cause tears.

Slowly, Wilbur lowered himself into a sitting position on the floor, not wanting to further scare the hybrid by standing at his daunting height. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just need to know how exactly you ended up in my closet." When that prompted no response, Wilbur tried another tactic. "Are you hungry? Thirsty? You look like hell, little man."

That seemed to get the fox's interest, their eyes losing most of the previous terror and now gleaming with hunger. It was only further confirmed when Wilbur heard the hybrid's stomach grumble loudly.

Soon enough, he was leaning on a kitchen counter while the fox sat where he was earlier, practically inhaling a bowl of cereal as Wilbur watched from a distance. He had turned on one lamp to light up the area just a bit, positioning it so that it wouldn't glare into the boy's bunks. Somehow, the boys didn't wake up from the fox's ear-splitting scream, and Wilbur would have to look into getting a few more pairs for future use.

In the direct light, Wilbur could see the feeble frame of the hybrid. They were impeccably thin for a child, though they had to be closer to being a teenager due to their size. Their fur was matted, looking like it had been weeks since it had been brushed. The white parts of their fur were a light brown from dirt, and the orange that should be brighter was also darker in color, the hybrid obviously not having bathed in quite a while (the smell wasn't very nice either, reminded Wilbur of wet dog). They had a rather bushy tail, though it had burrs embedded into the thick fur and was just as dirty as the rest of them. The newsboy hat that had fallen off was now on the hybrid's head, obscuring their ears and looking just as ragged as the rest of them, their white shirt and dark jeans looking to be the only clothes this kid owned. They didn't even have any shoes or socks, their feet practically cemented with mud and dirt. It was fairly obvious how utterly disheveled and rough this hybrid had been living for god knows how long, and it made Wilbur a bit upset to see someone so close in age to his own little brothers was suffering like this.

"I'll be right back. Stay right here, please. There's more cereal here if you want it," Wilbur placed the box in front of the hybrid gently, careful to keep his movements even and predictable for them. They eyed him suspiciously, though as Wilbur walked away he could hear the sound of a bag being lifted from the box and gremlin-like munching noises.

Wilbur walked back to his room and to the closet he had found the fox, sifting through shirts and pants for something adequate enough until he found an old, red sweater of Tommy's and a pair of pajama pants he was 90% sure were Tubbo's. He left his room and returned to the living/dining area, unsurprised to see that the bag of cereal had been nearly devoured by the starving fox.

He set the pair of clothes down in front of the hybrid, pulling out one of the dining chairs and sitting down in front of them. Wilbur clasped his hands together and rested them on the table, giving the hybrid a kind smile as they stared cautiously at him, still slowly eating the last few crumbs of cereal left in the bag.

"I got you some clothes. The ones you have don't look very comfortable or clean. I can wash them

for you if you'd like?" Wilbur offered softly, trying to leave the option of refusing the clothes open, even though he really didn't want the fox to stay in such ragged attire. The fox was quiet, looking from Wilbur to the set of clothes next to them on the table, visibly debating the options in their mind. Then, hesitantly, they reached out to take the clothes, looking to Wilbur again as if they needed further reassurance. Wilbur nodded fervently, his smile growing warmer as the fox took the clothes and placed them in their lap.

"Great, awesome. Listen, there's a bathroom right over there," Wilbur turned and pointed to a door in the narrow hall that was still ajar from when Wilbur had been looking around the caravan. He looked back to the fox, still pointing to the door. "You can change there. Or, better yet, you can take a shower if you'd like. I know I don't like feeling particularly gunky, and I'm sure you feel the same?"

The fox gave Wilbur a small nod, looking down sheepishly.

"Oh, please don't be embarrassed! I didn't mean for it to come off like that. It's nothing to be ashamed of, trust me, I've had my days where I've just dived into trash cans for fun," Wilbur quickly apologized. The latter comparison wasn't true, but it wasn't a total lie. Wilbur had gone dumpster-diving quite a few times, mostly with Schlatt and Connor. They said that the trash sometimes had riches in it, though the most they ever got from it was a few dollars or lost jewelry.

The fox looked back up at him, and for the first time, they flashed a small grin at Wilbur, amused at the man's admission. It had to be one of the most adorable and charming things he's ever seen, and it was right then the irrational part of his brain said, 'mine now. this fox? adopted.' Of course, this would officially happen about six or so months in the future, but the Wilbur here shook away such a silly thought as he watched the fox get up and disappear into the bathroom, shutting the door behind them and the light shining through the bottom crack of the door after it was flipped on.

Wilbur moved to clean up the table and throw away the empty bag and box, hearing the faint sound of the shower turning on. The door opened for a moment as clothes and a hat were discarded out into a heap in the hallway before closing once more, and Wilbur walked up to pick them up so they weren't in the way. He discarded them into a hamper that was stuffed into a corner, making mental note to do laundry the first chance he got. After doing a bit more house-keeping, he slid the small dining table out of the way of the couch and pulled out the bed that it shaped into, Wilbur relaxing on the creaky box-springs as he waited for the fox to be done. It was far from being as comfortable as his bed was, but he didn't want to sleep there until he had scrubbed the sheets and blankets clean; and also got those windows bolted shut. He'd figure out something for the fox, and wasn't opposed to sleeping on the floor if it came down to it.

He really didn't mean to fall asleep as soon as he did, but he couldn't fight the grogginess and the magnetic feeling of unconsciousness that pulled him in effortlessly. He didn't dream at all, and was roused from his short slumber by the feeling of someone burrowing into his side. A blanket was now covering his lower torso and most of his legs, though falling short of his ankles. Looking over, he was surprised to see the fox-hybrid pretty much glued to him, head resting against his side and body curled up in their own blanket, again stolen from Wilbur's room. But this time, he didn't really mind, as the hybrid looked significantly cleaner, their fur now fluffy, bright orange. It still would need a comb through to get rid of some of the knots, or possibly a trim, but that could come later if they stuck around.

It didn't weird out Wilbur that the fox, who had been terrified of Wilbur almost an hour ago, was now friendly towards him, using Wilbur as a pillow and/or heat-source. He just assumed it to be a hybrid thing. Of course, all hybrids were different, but he had enough knowledge and experience

with them to know that some stuff was just an instinct. He had seen Schlatt ram his head into someone else's while in the midst of a bar fight. He watched as Techno would fill his room and adorn even his casual attire with golden trinkets. Phil on multiple occasions - when Wilbur and Techno were still fairly young and the bird-hybrid was still figuring out how to be a father - would pick at his wings and sometimes pull out feathers when he was stressed. Even Tubbo, who was part moobloom, was drawn to bees, easily befriending the usually hostile insects and harvesting honey without being attacked.

Just recently, actually, Tubbo's horns had started coming in, and it was not an easy experience for anyone, especially Tubbo. He had to deal with splitting headaches and woke up to a bleeding scalp as the horns emerged. In the beginning, this resulted in a lot of tears and Tommy being without a playmate most days, Tubbo not wanting to leave bed due to the pain or nausea the headaches would cause him. Wilbur was ever thankful for Schlatt being his friend again, because once he had told the ram-hybrid of the problem, he had shown up the next day with a literal briefcase of medicines and supplies. He spent the entire day telling Wilbur about what to watch out for, how to relieve the headaches and keep the bleeding from constantly ruining all of Wilbur's towels. He even got Tubbo a bee plushie, telling him that he now had his own bee to buzz around him like real mooblooms. It was out of character for Schlatt to be so genuinely thoughtful, though after divulging to Wilbur how long and miserable the horn process was, Wilbur could tell Schlatt was coming from a place of experience.

Wilbur was confident that whatever this oddball fox-hybrid was doing by cozying up to him so quickly after their initial meeting, it was just a hybrid quirk of some kind, just like Tubbo's bee obsession or Schlatt's headbutting tendencies. And those are what Wilbur could identify and understand without having to ask invasive questions, as he had learned throughout the years that pointing them out tended to be rude.

The next morning was one of chaos. Tommy had woken up first and scared Wilbur when he threw a pillow at the fox-hybrid which woke both of them up. Wilbur very quickly told off Tommy, who complained that he thought a wild animal had gotten inside. Tubbo was quick to follow behind Tommy, gauze that was wrapped tightly against his head visibly about to bleed through and indicating that it was going to be a bad day for the moobloom, regardless of the numbing cream Wilbur would apply to the crowning horns and the headache medicine Tubbo would take. The fox-hybrid screeched once more, this time much shorter but still very, very painful to everyone's ears.

After Wilbur explained to the two boys that the hybrid meant no harm, Wilbur realized he had never gotten a name from the fox.

"Fundy," The fox mumbled, the first words Wilbur ever heard him speak. He wasn't even sure that the fox could speak, but he was happy to learn he could. He was also intrigued when he had gone outside to see the damage the storm had caused outside, and around the back of the caravan where Wilbur's window was located leaned a very rickety yet functional ladder, made completely out of sticks and thick grass to hold together the entire structure.

It took Fundy a few days to open up about where he had come from, but he finally told Wilbur one evening while watching the Brit make dinner. He explained that his parents left one day and just never returned. Fundy then struck out on his own, wandering from the small town he had lived in after no one offered to help him and into the wilderness, where he had been aimlessly traveling through for, after checking the date with Wilbur, four months.

Wilbur didn't hesitate to offer to let Fundy stay with them, and he was delighted when the fox

excitedly agreed.

Months went by, and Wilbur had more than enough money to move to where Schlatt was. However, he kept delaying the trip to look for homes, always making excuses for himself that caused him to push it back by a day, then a week, then eventually an entire month.

But what really was going on? It was that Wilbur saw just how attached his brothers had become to the land, and how Fundy was settling in and beginning to venture out with the boys too. Though, he mostly stayed home and started building things, experimenting. Wilbur, without fully realizing it quite yet, had made a home right here, in the small caravan surrounded by limitless opportunities.

But what had really cemented it was when Fundy had called him 'dad' one day, completely casually. The fox had quickly apologized for the slip of tongue, but Wilbur was far from upset by it. Wilbur asked Fundy nearly a week later if he wanted for Wilbur to adopt him as his actual son, and Wilbur became overjoyed when the fox happily accepted.

Really, that's when L'Manburg was born.

Eventually two years passed, and Wilbur was 21 when Dream came knocking, telling him that he needed to either pledge allegiance to the SMP or get out. When Wilbur read over the laws that came with full citizenship, he laughed in Dream's face and told him to kindly fuck off. That's when the War for Independance began. Wilbur became blinded by the glorious battles he had read about to realize that three out of his five loyalists were still teenagers, Tubbo and Tommy about 14 and Fundy 16. Still, they prevailed after a year of fighting, a trade Tommy made having ended it all, sacrificing two discs he had gained after exploring and was very proud of. L'Manburg prospered for two more years after that, Wilbur having held the election after L'manburg had thoroughly established itself as a landmark in the quickly growing SMP.

And, well, everyone knows what happens after that.

During his time both during the first war and his first and final term as president, Wilbur grew distant from his horned friend. He had forgotten about everything the ram had helped him with, and when the Election rolled around, Wilbur had the gall to believe he was entitled to the famous businessman's endorsement because at one time or another, they had been friends. Instead, he had failed to see that his old friend already had much darker intentions in mind, failed to see the smokescreen Schlatt had thrown around himself that hid the pain and loneliness that crippled the ram in Wilbur's absence. He failed to realize that he had yet again neglected someone he cared about and paid the price in just, even if it wasn't completely all of his doing. When Wilbur apologized to Schlatt in the Afterlife, both of them argued over who got to have the last apologetic word, eventually falling into name-calling and venomless criticisms.

It felt like old times.

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Wilbur or Fundy didn't hear the soft, clicking footsteps of someone approaching from the entrance of the courtyard, but the crinkling sound of a paper bag made Fundy's pressed ears perk up alertly. The fox looked up from his father's shoulder and was met with the sight of Eret, digging through the lunch-bag in their hand and not paying attention to the scene in front of them. Wilbur physically tensed when Eret spoke, their voice sending Wilbur through another flurry of mixed emotions, and they were not nearly as positive as the ones he had felt when he saw Fundy.

For the second time that day, Wilbur felt scared.

"Hey Fundy, I brought you some lunch. Sorry for being away for a bit, there was something Niki needed help with and it took longer than expected-," They kept talking as they pulled out an apple, tossing it in the air before finally looking to Fundy and the stranger the fox was tightly embracing. "Oh, did I interrupt something? Who is this, Fundy?"

Of course the king hadn't recognized the iconic outfit from behind, minus the beanie. It had been months since Wilbur had fatefully blown up an entire country on a cool November afternoon, and given everything that had and has been going on within the SMP, why would Eret even remember what Wilbur had worn?

Slowly, gently, Wilbur let go of Fundy, his arms falling against his sides and he pulled away from his son. Fundy attempted to keep hold of Wilbur, looking at him with eyes full of alarm and calculation like he was trying to guess what his father was going to do next. It only served to pull Wilbur's heartstrings. He was still completely unpredictable, an emotionally and mentally unstable individual to his son. To everyone, in hindsight. Wilbur would hopefully get used to that second-glancing look, because he had a feeling it would not go away for a very, very long time.

He tried to give Fundy a reassuring smile, but it didn't seem to do anything for the fox, much to Wilbur's dismay. However, Fundy did let go of Wilbur completely, taking a step to the side to be fully within Eret's line of sight. His once soot-stained face had been somewhat cleaned by his tears, but the orange fur was more of a dampened orange and came in large splotches, probably from rubbing against the fabric of Wilbur's trench coat. He wiped at his eyes in an attempt to make himself more presentable, at least half-aware of what he looked like.

"Oh my god, Fundy, are you alright?" Eret asked, the sound of Eret rapidly approaching and the concern in their tone both warmed Wilbur's heart and caused him to prepare himself for whatever the king would say. He could take it. It's not like Wilbur hadn't thought of the vile and angered reactions his family might have when he was in the Afterlife. He had promised himself that he wasn't going to hold it against them, because they were in the right, one way or another. Everyone had the right to be angry with Wilbur, and at least Eret and him weren't as close as they had once been, so maybe it would be easier to hear it from them.

He could barely have prepared for a sword at his neck, back against the soft grass as he struggled

to keep Eret's wrist from lowering any farther than it was already.

Once Eret had gotten to Fundy and checked him over, they looked over to Wilbur, and that's when the realization had dawned upon the king. They even removed their sunglasses to get a better look at Wilbur, white eyes meeting Wilbur's fading ones. Before Wilbur even had a chance to say hello to them he had been tackled to the ground, pulling a diamond sword from their sheathe on their hip and pinning Wilbur's scrawny frame beneath them. Fundy was quick to react, shouting at Eret and attempting to pull him off Wilbur.

"Eret, wait! Stop!" Fundy struggled as he locked his arms beneath Eret's armpits, pulling with all his might and sending them both tumbling backwards, Eret tossing his sword to the side in the process so as to not accidentally harm the fox.

Wilbur was quick to rise up to a sitting position and scooted back a few feet, catching a breath that had been knocked from him when Eret had tackled him. Wilbur coughed, pounding on his chest with his fist as he listened to Fundy struggle to hold back Eret. "Fundy, let me go!" The king yelled, thrashing in the fox's arms.

"No, wait, Eret, please, just stop for a minute!" Fundy pleaded. Wilbur looked up from his coughing fit to see Fundy's one arm slipping out from under Eret, and it was all the king needed, stealing the opportunity to use his free arm and rip Fundy's arm from his own, scrambling off of the fox before he could grab them again. The king then swiped the fallen sword from the ground, accidentally slicing their palm on the blade in their haste to have the upper hand, blood running down the handle and droplets falling into the green grass.

With the agility of a gazelle, Eret was standing almost over Wilbur. Their feet were firmly placed beside Wilbur's hips, the Brit having to lean back as the tip of the sword was held warningly under his chin. The sharp tip pressed just close enough to his Adam's apple, and the unpleasant graze Wilbur felt against his skin when he swallowed nervously was yet another stark reminder of his own mortality.

Panting, Eret spoke, their voice no longer chipper and sultry, instead replaced with the dark tone that had once haunted Wilbur throughout his years and will forever accompany him to his next grave.

"You aren't supposed to be here."

####

As a ghost, or whatever Schlatt and Wilbur were considered to be, touch was non-existent. The Afterlife was the only place they could have all five of their senses, though not that they were important there. After all, the void was completely barren of everything other than the solid flooring they could walk on and themselves. Even though they had made considerable amends while trapped together, both of them were more than less happy to give up most of their senses just to be able to get away from each other and the purgatory they were stuck in. Of course, there were times when they both wished they weren't cursed with being completely invisible, and maybe

there were times when Schlatt wished he could feel everything other than his own emotions. He longed for the gentle feeling of rain or the summer twilight and the warm nights that would soon follow in its wake, and envied at times when he couldn't feel the burning feeling of a wither skull making impact beneath his feet; instead, he was stuck watching it happen to others.

Schlatt wanted nothing more to still have that blissful curse as he trekked through the snow behind Foolish, the frigid cold rattling him with shivers and making his teeth chatter like a beaver.

Of course his outfit was not fit to be resistant to the freezing temperatures: it was one dress shirt and a pair of slacks, with his pair of scuffed leather shoes having been invaded by snow and numbed his feet within the first hour of walking in the forest. Foolish had offered his vest but Schlatt declined, noting how Foolish was a bit smaller than him and it probably wouldn't have fit. Besides, he didn't think it would take too long to make it to SnowChester. He knew it wasn't near Manberg, but he didn't expect it to be actual *miles* away.

Foolish had told him of a shorter way there, but after hearing the distinct sound of his name being called for near the way Foolish began to take him, he instead asked for the scenic route. And now, here Schlatt was, wondering if he should've just taken his chances with the fast path.

Though, after learning that it involved swimming, he realized it would've been for nothing anyways.

It was probably around the two hour mark when Foolish had insisted they make a detour to get Schlatt some proper clothes. As much as Schlatt wanted to just keep soldiering on, he doubted turning blue and being ridden with frostbite would be the best first impression returning to Tubbo's life. So, he followed the golden man to a cave, where Foolish made a very quick campfire much to Schlatt's relief, warming his hands and getting as close as he could without accidentally burning himself.

Foolish left the ram by himself for what seemed like forever, the sun lowering in the sky considerably before he returned. By then, the fire had pretty much died out, and Schlatt was left cold again, though the cave floor was much better than the freezing snow. Foolish carried a backpack full of food and proper clothing, handing it over to Schlatt.

"That should fit you! You're about Sam's size, so I just took an extra set of his from Tubbo's house," He said, turning back around and walking away from the cave and towards some spruce trees. Yelling from where he stood while facing a tree, Schlatt was brought from his confusion of the man's, at first, odd behavior. "You can change, I'm not looking!"

Oh yeah. Privacy was a thing that existed again. He didn't get a lot of that after Wilbur showed up, only ever getting maybe an hour or so of it if he returned to the Afterlife before the Brit did.

Originally it had been annoying. After their meeting and subsequent silence between the two, Wilbur started singing and humming to fill the air, which was cut quite short when Schlatt demanded quiet. Fights would break out between them, some petty, others seated much deeper in resentment. Eventually, once they had nothing else to argue about, apologizing happened. By the time they had no more words to express, Schlatt had found himself used to Wilbur's ever constant presence, and he lost any sense of 'alone time.'

And even when he'd visit the Overworld, he was never not watching over Tubbo or Manberg. He

had every chance to wander as far as he could, far from the SMP's boundaries and into the solitude of the wilderness. Yet, he never did. Maybe it was because he subconsciously wanted to be around others, or that he just didn't trust himself alone with his own thoughts. It was being alone that had led him to his role in history, and so maybe it was that instead. Schlatt himself never addressed it and nor did he want to. He already had too much time to reflect on himself, and he certainly didn't want to try and pick apart his psyche more than he's already tried.

He emptied the clothes onto the cave floor, quickly changing into the brown sweater and fur-lined coat that fit him nearly perfectly, though the mittens he had were a bit too small, so he simply stored them in the deep pockets of the beige snow pants he had replaced his slacks with. The boots he put on felt clunky compared to his regular shoes, but he was grateful that they were warm and fit decently. He even got a red scarf which he wrapped around his neck, the soft material not the best insulator but at least added some flair to the outfit. By the time he had everything on, he was thoroughly warmed, stuffing his unprotected hands in the pockets of his coat to keep them from the cold.

He picked up the backpack after putting his old clothes and shoes inside, stealing a few strips of dried meat before carrying it over to Foolish. He was bouncing lightly on his feet and whistling an unfamiliar tune, still staring at the bark of the tree. Schlatt tapped him on the shoulder, and when the golden man turned back to face him, Schlatt pushed the backpack into his unexpected arms. "Thanks for the clothes."

Foolish... grinned? His eyebrows at least moved and reflected the cheery expression. "Not a problem! Sorry for taking so long, the walk to SnowChester is still a pretty good distance even when you know where you're going."

"S fine, but do you think we can continue on now? Nighttime isn't a great time to be out on a stroll," Schlatt tried to seem nonchalant about his concern, but the nagging thought of having to bunker down in a random cave for the night made him grit his teeth. Not only was it delaying seeing Tubbo, it was giving whoever was looking for him (Connor, he assumed) more of a chance to find him. And he did not escape a gigantic fucking crater with two much better equipped people chasing after him just for Schlatt to test his luck again.

"Oh, right," Foolish pulled out a pocket-clock from his pants pocket, shrugging on the pack to his shoulder. "It's about five-thirty now, so it will probably be seven or eight o'clock before we reach the town's gate."

"It's already so late?" Schlatt asked incredulously.

"Yeah, I know, time flies when you're having fun!" Foolish giggled, and Schlatt had to fight back an eye-roll.

"Actually, lemme give you something," Foolish reached over his head, pulling out a gleaming iron sword from a sheath on his back Schlatt had never noticed. Or maybe he was just too cold or the golden man had grabbed it while grabbing the clothes. He held out the sword blade down to Schlatt, the tip slightly piercing the snow. "It should help if any monsters come out. You know how to use one, right?"

Of course Schlatt knew how to. The question was if he *wanted* to.

“I, uh, it’s fine. I don’t need it,” Schlatt said, looking away from the silver metal that showed a distorted reflection of himself. Honestly, he saw more than just himself in the blade, though that was more of himself remembering memories of swords. They never ended well, those memories. Too much shouting, too much blood, too much *alcohol* is what danced in the reflection of the blade, though once Schlatt blinked it was all gone.

Foolish’s eyebrows creased in confusion, slowly pulling the sword back to sheathe it. “Are you sure?”

Schlatt nodded, shaking off the sudden burst of chills he felt even though he was dressed warm as could be. “Yeah, I am. We should continue on, though.”

So, they walked on, Foolish jabbering on and on about a flurry of random topics while Schlatt didn’t listen, instead caught up in his stewing thoughts once more.

He remembered the nights he’d slash and destroy his office with a sword, swinging manically and intent on making sure nothing was left unharmed.

He had remembered the steel blade slicing across Quackity’s arm in a drunken rage.

He remembered the pommel of a sword slamming into Tubbo’s chest, forcing him into the box he would be slaughtered in.

He remembered the shining metal being the last thing he saw as his chest felt rock-heavy, gravity pulling him to the ground as he struggled for breath and smelled the burnt toast he had for breakfast that morning.

With each step he took, Schlatt felt more and more unsure about what exactly he was doing here.

####

Wilbur wasn’t sure what he could decide on feeling: scared of Eret ending his life for the *second* time, or worried about having Fundy watch him die for a *second* time.

Either way, anxiety raced through his senses, paralyzing him in place. The cold metal of Eret’s sword was the only thing he could focus on feeling, alarmingly aware of exactly how hard it was pressed against his throat and how shallow he needed to breathe as not to accidentally cut open his neck. So, very carefully, Wilbur gulped and spoke meekly as to not surprise Eret, or cause the blade to dig in further.

“I’m not here to hurt anybody.”

Eret scoffed, their stance and grip not faltering as they stared daggers into Wilbur. “Don’t even with that bullshit. You blew up a goddamn country as your final ‘screw you’ to everyone. You don’t get the luxury of just strolling in like it’s every other Tuesday,” Wilbur felt the sword press deeper into his neck, leaning back further in an attempt to keep himself protected. “And you sure as *hell* don’t get to walk into *my* castle as if you’re *welcome* here.”

Before Wilbur could reply, Fundy took Eret by the wrist, having gotten up from his struggle with the king. The fox’s hat had fallen off in the scuffle, so his ears were pressed flat against his head as he spoke, looking Eret in the eye as his shaky voice tried to stop them again.

“Please, Eret, put the sword down,” Wilbur flinched inwardly at the broken tone his son had, giving Wilbur no doubt Fundy was definitely on the verge of tears or already crying.

“Fundy, he’s not-!”

“Eret, please, just trust me for a minute-.”

“No, Fundy, you’re not thinking clearly right now. I know he’s your dad, but do you remember-?”

“God, of course I do!” Fundy snapped, taking a swift step in front of Eret and effectively making them move the sword away from Wilbur. Wilbur scooted back further and stood, making sure to keep his hands visible to Eret who was still watching him, and listened as Fundy’s inflection grew more and more desperate. “I remember every moment of that day! I live with those reminders *everyday* L’Manberg ceases to exist! So don’t stand there and fucking patronize me about how clear my thoughts are, because that’s *my* father! Only I’m allowed to dictate how I feel about him just waltzing back into my life after everything that’s happened, not you!”

A very tense silence fell upon them all, other than Fundy’s quiet sniffing as he wiped at his eyes. Wilbur wanted to comfort him, but knew making any moves towards his son would probably end with Eret tackling him to the ground again. Eret refused to let Wilbur from their direct field of vision, but it was obvious they were considering Fundy’s words, lowering their sword by increments before sighing and letting it fall completely against their side. As if to reassure Fundy even more, they completely sheathed the weapon. Though, they looked completely unenthused about it, if crossing their arms and clicking their tongue was anything to judge by.

“I apologize for not listening the first time,” The king grumbled out eventually, clearly not enthralled to be apologizing. Fundy nodded his head in silent acceptance, turning to Wilbur.

For a moment he looked surprised that he was still there, like Wilbur had just been a hallucination both he and Eret were seeing, but that quickly faded to a happiness Wilbur hadn’t seen in anyone before. It looked like his son had stars in his eyes and fireworks going off in his brain, giving him a child-like glow. The fox walked back over to Wilbur and hugged him once more, Wilbur quickly returning the embrace with a content grin.

He did make the mistake of looking at Eret while in the embrace, and Wilbur only felt a red-hot hostility in the king’s eyes as they analyzed every micro-movement he made. Wilbur also took notice of their hand being completely ready to pull back out the sword they held barely a minute prior, and that’s when he tried to focus on something else.

When Fundy pulled away from the hug and placed himself shoulder-to-shoulder (though it was more shoulder-to-bicep) with Wilbur, a big smile on his face which melted Wilbur’s heart. He couldn’t remember the last time he had seen that smile on Fundy, which a part of him chastised

himself for.

“See, he’s not trying to hurt me!”

Now that was something Wilbur directly cursed himself for. He hated the fact he was immediately assumed to have ill-intentions, but then again, he had no right to complain about it. He would just take his blessings of Fundy not tearing him apart or verbally rejecting him, because this entire meeting up until Eret had gone much better than expected, even though Wilbur technically hadn’t planned on interacting with Fundy originally.

Eret seemed to externalize Wilbur’s emotions, a groan escaping the king’s throat as they pinched the bridge of their nose. “Fundy, that’s not the point. We don’t know how far gone he still is.”

“I think I’m pretty over the insanity stuff,” Wilbur piped up, finally finding his voice in this conversation. He tried to keep his volume level low, wanting to come off as least intimidating as possible. “Being dead gives you a long time to get over yourself.”

Eret’s eyes only narrowed at Wilbur suspiciously, but Fundy couldn’t look any more excited than he already was, practically buzzing beside his father.

“See? Not insane!”

Wilbur beamed at Fundy, though inside his mind he sympathized with Eret’s distrust. Of course it would spark some initial disbelief that Wilbur, the man who blew up his own country out of what everyone else deemed as spite and then begged to die by his father’s hand, was completely sane again. Wilbur had manipulated people around him, he had *hurt* the people closest to him. Why would he come back and see his son without some sort of ulterior motive at play?

And so, in a way, Wilbur felt sorry for Fundy for not having the same instinctive distrust and doubt. He shouldn’t be this happy to see Wilbur. Wilbur didn’t deserve to get hugs or be defended or have a sword drawn to his throat pushed away. If anything, it should’ve been Fundy with the sword to his throat. Yet, he wasn’t, and Wilbur got to have a pleasant reunion, something the Brit hadn’t expected by a long-shot. While he was thankful for it, he knew the happiness wouldn’t last very long, and eventually that doubt and angst would come rolling in by the waves. Wilbur could only prepare for it, but for the moment he would proudly stand beside Fundy as a new man, a new *father*, with a lot of time to make-up for not being there for him in the first place.

Eret sighed in defeat.

####

The Prime Path was a reassuring sight to Wilbur as he and Fundy walked, the sun beginning to fall deeper and deeper into the horizon as it casted a heavenly glow across the land. They stopped for a moment earlier to appreciate the breathtaking landscape, Wilbur completely mesmerized by the beauty of it all, and it was only made better with his son by his side.

They had left Eret’s castle after Puffy and Ranboo showed up outside, just a few minutes after Fundy convinced Eret to give Wilbur a chance. Wilbur panicked and said he needed to go, still needing to see Tommy before he was probably carted away to some secret facility. He had no doubt that if Sam had been the one orchestrating the revival scheme that the creeper-hybrid had *definitely* built something to house Schlatt and himself.

Eret was relieved at first to be rid of him, but once Fundy asked to go with him, Eret was singing a much different tune. They both still had a myriad of questions Wilbur had no time to answer, so after grabbing Fundy's hand and pulling him towards the courtyard's exit, he promised to visit Eret the next chance he got. And surprisingly, the king didn't feed him to the wolves as they left out of a back door Fundy led him through.

Maybe that was a sign Eret still had a sliver of faith in him. Or they just didn't want to involve Fundy in whatever Wilbur had gotten himself into.

Now, they were on the way to Tommy's hotel, Fundy guiding Wilbur and filling him in on events that have happened since he died. Wilbur knew every detail his son described, as he had been there in spirit for most of them, but he wanted Fundy to have this. Wilbur had already done enough talking over him and dismissing his ideas and stories; he wasn't about to continue the streak.

It also filled the air between them, which Wilbur was quietly dreading would turn towards questioning soon. Not that Wilbur didn't happily answer Fundy's questions about death, or really anything he had to ask, but he was apprehensive about explaining his omnipresence around Fundy and Tommy *while* he was dead, something he tried to keep from slipping out until it was the right time to confess. It wasn't something Wilbur could just gloss over, and after already explaining Ghostbur was a separate entity from himself to Fundy, he didn't have an excuse to have in-depth knowledge about things he shouldn't. He wasn't sure how either of them would react to it, and he especially wasn't definitive about trying to comfort them both on things that happened months ago. From Fundy's failed wedding and abandonment by Phil, to Tommy's abuse in exile and constant reckless actions, it was a lot to unpack and sift through *while* trying to work through the issues they all had before he died. The last thing Wilbur wanted was to hurt them, even by accident, so he was understandably nervous to even *think* about broaching the topic. Try as he might, nothing he could do would prepare him for the pain and tears he would inevitably share with both of them, or the wordy and lengthy apologies he would form despite being far from enough to patch the hole they had in their already sunk ship. Hell, he had prepared to see Fundy and *still* lost his composure when an explosion went off, as if Wilbur hadn't seen his son's inventions blow up in his face a million times before.

So, he tried to set aside the nagging voice in his head and instead listened to Fundy, enjoying the time he would get with both him and Tommy before all of the serious conversations would occur.

Before Wilbur would make sure the members of the SMP knew just how *serious* he was this time around.

Fundy had once or twice commented on his appearance, which was apparently back to normal. His skin was back to the pale tan it once was and his eyes were just one shade off from being the dark chocolate he was known for having. His hair was the fluffy dark brown he had died with, though a prominent white streak stubbornly remained down the middle. Other than the latter detail, Wilbur looked the same as when he had left.

He wasn't sure if that was the best way to phrase it, but it was the only way he could look at it, with his trench coat and rebel gear still having not been abandoned for something new.

Keeping pace with Fundy, the sun finally dipped below the horizon as they reached a familiar area of the SMP. Wilbur saw Tommy's bench, a bench he had appeared at when Dream was finally imprisoned. He saw Tommy's house, though it was very much still a dirt mound and had not changed in the slightest. Wilbur could feel the pep in his step as they walked through the tunnel of the Prime Path, knowing that he would see Tommy's grand creation in just a few moments. Fundy had warned him that Tommy might not be there, but Wilbur said he didn't mind. He suggested that they both could wait for him there and catch up more, which seemed to please Fundy as Wilbur caught a glance at his son's wagging tail.

Once they finally exited the tunnel, they were engulfed in the shadow of the hotel. Wilbur had never paid attention to just how *large* it was, but he gawked at its intricate design. The red walling was very Tommy-esc, along with the cobblestone accents and spruce wood framing. The floors rose to an astounding height and the building itself looked to be on top of a quartz foundation, the lanterns on the outside giving it an inviting entrance while the bright lights inside lit up the building like a Christmas tree, only drawing in Wilbur and Fundy like moths. The sign which sat outside the hotel was illuminated with even more lights, proudly stating in blocky-text ' ***THE BIG INNIT HOTEL*** ', every letter capitalized and bolded so you would undoubtedly read it in the teenager's brash tone.

Wilbur had to stop to take it all in, Fundy patiently waiting beside him as he began to ramble on about the curious being that was Sam Nook, whom Wilbur was already aware of. Really, he just couldn't get over the fact that, of everything his little brother wanted to do after imprisoning the literal founder of the SMP, he wanted to start a *business*. Not that Tommy wasn't experienced with the practice. After all, he had grown up respecting Schlatt, and they *had* run an illegal drug company for a time just to piss off Dream; though it was Wilbur and Fundy who did most of the actual potion brewing.

Actually, it made perfect sense to Wilbur now that he thought about it.

As he took in the glory of his little brother's ambition, his eyes had finally graced the roof of the building. His stomach flipped violently once he saw what, or *who*, was standing up there.

It was Tommy, literally standing on the edge with his back towards Wilbur and Fundy while he gesticulated wildly, obviously speaking to someone. After all, if Wilbur had strained his hearing, he probably would've heard his voice in the quiet of the growing night. His red and white shirt looked just the same as everyday, with a bright orange vest overtop of it and a bright yellow hard hat on his head. It was the gear Sam Nook permitted everyone to wear on the site, though since construction had been completed nearly a week prior, it was possible it had just become a habit to put on for Tommy. He looked just as animated as he usually was, though those weren't the things Wilbur's mind brought to his attention.

Instead, visions of a pillar of similar height to the hotel washed over his mind. The sight of Tommy, disheveled and bruised and utterly *broken* stood on the pillar, feet teetering on the edge as he looked down despondently. The exploded remains of what had become his home laid around them, holes where a tent and a tree should be and a broken nether portal that had been the teen's one salvation of connection to the country he left behind. His items he had saved as a last ditch

effort to retain his individuality from Dream, gone and turned to a fine ash. The screams, the *wails* that escaped Wilbur's throat as he was dragged back into the Afterlife, forced to let his little brother die alone. The shame Wilbur had carried on his shoulders since that day came crashing back down on him at full-force, sending tears to prick the corners of his eyes and breathing to come in short spurts.

*'This couldn't happen again. Not again not again not again not again not again not again n ot
again not again-'*

He barely registered Fundy taking a hold of his shoulders, frantically asking him what was wrong. Wilbur couldn't hear him, his jaw moving but only the voices of Wilbur's own thoughts crowded his ears, harmonizing with the drumming rhythm of explosions that did not exist. His heart hammered against his ribcage violently, eyes still completely glued on Tommy as his visions blurred with reality, completely distorting his perception as Fundy and the Hotel faded in and out before disappearing entirely. Only the Prime Path remained in his sight, leading to the pillar Tommy was on like a red carpet.

He was back in that moment. He could feel the grip of the Afterlife pulling him away as he watched Tommy begin to give into the suicidal thoughts he had been struggling with since the beginning of exile. Wilbur could see the steady stream of tears falling from his little brother's face, his expression contorted into a mixture of one part pain, another part agony, and the small ounce of relief that only served to give Wilbur further anguish. By this point, Wilbur had completely forgotten about being revived, about his son holding him steady in the middle of the path, about Tommy being perfectly fine on top of the roof of his hotel. Instead, his hallucinations and unleveled terror became his reality, just as it had when the explosion went off in Eret's castle.

Wilbur struggled to run forward before, but this time he was completely free of movement. He took advantage of this, bursting forward from his frozen states he attempted to outrun his race with the Afterlife. He couldn't go back, not now. He refused to let its cold tendrils drag him back from this again, because he could feel them swiping at his arms.

Tommy was right *there*, Wilbur could *save* him.

Tommy was dangerously close to the edge, and everything around Wilbur felt like it was moving in slow-motion just as he reached the half-way point between them. The Afterlife gripped him by the torso and forced him down on the ground, the heavy pressure holding him down on his back as he thrashed desperately, a futile attempt to buy him more time. The voice in his head was screaming obscenities at Wilbur, begging for him to not stay down despite how hard he tried to escape. He was completely overwhelmed by the amount of touch he felt at once, from his arms getting pulled back behind him in a restraining position to gentle pats on his cheek.

It all had built-up. It was months, of what felt like *years*, of build-up, with every conceivable emotion known to man packed into a tiny box that needed to be opened. And it all came spilling out when the Tommy Wilbur saw lifted a leg up and began to lean forward.

The absolute gut-wrenching, strangled scream Wilbur let out hurt his own eardrums, causing them to ring afterwards.

It was louder than when he had originally witnessed the scene, full of every ounce of agony and fury he felt since he had been in the Afterlife. His body numbed, the feeling of the Afterlife dissipating completely fading until only the sinking feeling in his chest remained, burning with the reignited fire Wilbur had lost. The hallucination began to fade into reality, the sky turning starry and the environment returning to the moon-lit scenery that surrounded the hotel and the Prime Path. Still, Wilbur only saw the version of Tommy about to fall to his death, the pillar still having taken the place of the hotel. And so, with his remaining energy, with what little time his brain said he had left to stop his little brother, he did the only thing he could do as he lay immobilized on the ground, the image of the pillar and Tommy beginning to fade into the terrifying white of the Afterlife:

“TOMMY, DON’T DO IT! GOD PLEASE STAY THERE, DON’T FALL PLEASE, GET DOWN PLEASE GET DOWN!”

Wilbur’s blood-curdling cries were what finally brought him to reality again. The sight of the hotel had been the blinding white because of the lights inside, his eyes having to adjust to the intensity. Fundy was crouched beside him, trying to quiet Wilbur best he could while the tall enderman-hybrid stood a few feet away, wide-eyed and looking between Wilbur and the hotel. He could only assume it was Puffy sitting on his back, holding his wrists with her small but calloused hands, though her grip had considerably loosened as he screamed. But what was most terrifying was watching Tommy whirl around on the building’s edge towards the voice of Wilbur, because as he saw Tommy’s face light up with shocked recognition, the teen placed his foot awkwardly on the edge.

He wobbled dangerously, until he finally tripped over himself and fell off the edge, letting out a startled screech as he grew closer and closer to the ground below.

“TOMMY! NO!”

Wilbur watched on helplessly, unable to do anything to save his little brother for a second time.

####

It was so dark in the spruce forest. Moonlight didn’t reach through the thick foliage of the pines, so Foolish was forced to carry a lantern to light the way, other hand gripping a sword as he looked around for any sign of danger. Schlatt was following by his side, also keeping a watchful eye out for glinting red eyes or hissing that usually would accompany the night. They both would stumble

over tree roots hidden beneath the crunching snow occasionally, and Schlatt tended to jump at the slightest sound more often than he liked to admit.

It was all worth it when Schlatt began to see the dim lights of a town ahead, and both he and Foolish picked up pace to escape the forest's darkness. Once they broke from the forest's treeline, they took a moment to catch their breath, which also gave Schlatt a moment to look over Snowchester.

It was the same as it had always been, but it did feel different now that Schlatt had the appreciation of the warm, inviting glow the village-esc town radiated, much preferable than the bitter freeze that had slowly begun to creep even through the thick layers of his clothing. The large house in the center was magnificently built, though the stone building that loomed on the hillside behind it sent goosebumps down Schlatt's arms. He knew what was in there, and he was both impressed and troubled by the faith Tubbo had in those decommissioned nukes not blowing up suddenly. Schlatt knew that being decommissioned meant they were unarmed and unable to be detonated, but it was still the thought of *what if* that stirred his concerns.

The pier leading into the ocean was dark unlike the rest of the town, which was lit by lanterns and torches on fence posts. The wheat farm beside the main house was thriving despite the frosty conditions, and the entire place: buildings, paths, stairways, and the unfinished wall that closed off the town's back shore was covered in about the same amount of snow they had been trekking through. Foolish had said something about a blizzard happening the day prior, though Schlatt was more interested in getting inside somewhere warm than listening to Foolish drone on about cold things.

As they walked further towards the town, that pit in Schlatt's stomach from earlier had returned with intensity. His steps slowed down as he thought about more and more about his thought-process that had brought him to this point. Of course Schlatt wanted nothing more than to apologize to Tubbo as soon as he could, but had he skipped a few steps? Was he being too direct? What would happen when Tubbo would see him? Was he making things worse? Is he gonna screw up the moobloom's routine?

No matter what Schlatt would do, he couldn't erase the past. It was painful for even him to think about, let alone imagining Tubbo coming face-to-face with his former-.

Schlatt stopped walking.

This was a mistake.

A very big mistake.

Foolish only took a few more steps ahead before turning to Schlatt, an excited and slightly puzzled expression forming on his face. "Aren't you coming, Jeb? I've only been talking up this place for hours, you gotta at least have a tour."

Schlatt wasn't listening, his thoughts racing through his head and striking him with the electrifying force of lightning:

Why would Schlatt show up to the teen's home unannounced?

He would scare the kid senseless.

Schlatt had no right to march over and ruin the kid's night. Or life, more so.

He should've stayed in the crater. He should've listened to Sam.

This was wrong on so many different levels. Why had it taken him until now to realize this?

They were both better off not seeing each other, or at least Tubbo was. It didn't matter how much Schlatt had grown fond of the moobloom over the months of him being dead; Tubbo didn't know that, nor should he give a rat's ass.

It surely wasn't going to make up for the shit Schlatt had done.

He was brought from his thoughts by someone snapping their fingers in front of his face. Blinking, he was surprised that of everyone to be in front of him, it was *Connor*.

Schlatt took a step back, surprised by the appearance of his former business affiliate who had switched out the Sonic onesie for a warm turtleneck and gloves. Looking behind Connor he saw Sam, dressed in full-plated armor and holding a sword in one hand, speaking to Foolish in a hushed tone. The nervous glances Foolish kept sending Schlatt told him that his cover had been blown. Schlatt did feel bad for using the guy like that, especially now since he didn't want to be here, but it was at least better that he didn't know him in the slightest.

How they had gotten here before them was beyond him, though he did forget about the fast-travel port Foolish had told him about hours prior, so it was to be assumed that's how.

"Schlatt, man, what are you doing?" Connor asked accusingly, like he was already expecting a fight out of Schlatt. His face turned into one of confusion when Schlatt spoke softly, defeated by the regret haunting each word that slipped out.

"I don't know. I really don't know, Connor."

He had been so *exhilarated* to finally see Tubbo this morning, to be able to interact with him.

Where had his rationale gone?

How was he so blinded by the need to seek out the teen that he failed to remember all of the times he had cornered the teen, just as he was unintentionally going to do here, and instead of apologizing to him, Schlatt had berated him. Scared him. Once, even, he had him executed in front of an entire population; cornered in a fucking *box* while Schlatt watched on with indifference.

He was disgusted with himself, more than he ever was when he was in the Afterlife.

He was starting to slowly wish they had just left him dead.

Connor sighed, putting a hand on Schlatt's shoulder comfortingly. "I know you feel guilty. I could tell by how desperate you were back in the crater to get out and see this kid."

"I-Is he here?" Schlatt was tempted to look around, but he didn't get the chance as Connor answered his question quickly.

"No, supposedly he had taken a guy named Michael to go see Tommy's Hotel, left a note on his front door. Sam and I found it when we arrived."

"How did you get here so fast? How did you even know-?"

"Sam didn't think you'd run into anyone who'd help you find SnowChester, but after not finding you literally everywhere else, we had to assume you did or found out somehow. So, we traveled by the little water cannon that's on the back end of SnowChester, and we've been waiting here since."

Schlatt processed everything Connor had to say, nodding solemnly. "Well, was I at least worth it?"

Connor chuckled, making Schlatt grin despite his upset mood. "Not even close."

"Ah shit, well at least you can make fun of me, then. I walked all the way here for nothing," Schlatt half-laughed, though he fell quiet soon after. Connor patted his shoulder before turning his head to Sam, saying something Schlatt didn't bother listening to, instead looking over the town once again.

It was a pretty damn good looking town.

He was proud of how far Tubbo had come despite the adversity and constant manipulation around every corner. He was proud the kid had finally stood up for himself and took control of his life, something he had always struggled with underneath Wilbur's, Schlatt's, and even his *own* administration.

Tubbo would be just fine without Schlatt. He didn't need the ram's apologies, he was doing great without them. He was thriving, even. Sure, Schlatt was worried for his well-being, and how he had never reached out to anyone for help or talked about anything bad that happened to him, but he had a support system. He had ways and people to go to. He didn't need Schlatt to try and dote on him

like a father he never asked for. Schlatt didn't have that privilege or honor, not in a million years, no matter how much compassion he had for the teen or how many apologies he would say; nothing was fixing the past.

Schlatt *was* in the past for the teen, and maybe it was time Schlatt let Tubbo stay in the past as well.

He hadn't even realized a tear shed from his eye until the wind blew across his face, making him quickly wipe at his cheek and try to compose himself before anyone else saw. He didn't like crying, and he sure wasn't to start it here in front of two people he barely knows and his estranged friend.

As he waited for Sam and Connor to finish up whatever conversation they had fallen into, they all failed to note the sound of snow crunching beneath feet and the light snorts of an animal behind the group quickly approaching. One set of footsteps sped up, causing the other set to momentarily speed up before pausing.

Schlatt felt something small collide with the back of his leg, making him curse as he quickly steadied himself. He felt tiny arms wrap as much as they could around Schlatt's calf, making him turn his body to see what had latched to his leg.

He was surprised to see a familiar baby piglin, dressed up in a trapper's hat and puffy yellow jacket. Half of their face displayed a skull that distinguished them as the undead version of their kind and the other half had a big brown eye, their skin a healthy pink with rosy snout and cheeks from the cold. They looked up at Schlatt curiously like a toddler would look at anything new. He wasn't sure how he wasn't freaking the child out due to his appearance, though he didn't know he looked fairly normal again. His hair and eyes had returned to the chestnut brown they once were, with the slim, horizontal pupils in his eyes outlined in a faint yellow. His goat-like ears, however, had remained a pristine white, and his horns stayed the deep-red, showing no signs of reverting anytime soon.

A deadly hush had fallen over the group all at once, Schlatt very quickly piecing together *who* this toddler was, and exactly *who* was accompanying him. And if the silence was anything to go by, then that meant only one thing.

Slowly, he raised his head up from Michael, and straight ahead of him by about ten yards stood Tubbo, still as a statue and with an uncanny deer in the headlights look. He was carrying a picnic basket, though it hung limply by his side as he gawked at the sight in front of him.

Tubbo's hair was concealed beneath an identical trapper hat Michael wore, with his yellow ears poking out from holes made in the sides of the hat. He wore the same brown and tan flannel/vest combo he normally did, with brown pants and boots that were lightly dusted in snow from the knees down. His light blue eyes were on complete display with how wide they were, and he looked paler than he usually was. A large burn scar maimed the bottom-left half of his face and ran down most of his visible neck, and it wouldn't surprise Schlatt if the teen had a couple more hidden away. It was the scar that always made him wince, no matter how many times he saw it. Because he knew who had given it to him, even if he wasn't the one that pulled the trigger.

They stood at a stand-still, neither of them daring to move as Tubbo processed who exactly his son was latched onto at the moment. Schlatt could see the disbelief beginning to take over the

moobloom's shocked expression. He saw the flickering fear and anger. There was no positive emotion Tubbo held upon seeing Schlatt, and that was something Schlatt understood with his entire being.

What he didn't understand was why Tubbo wasn't making any movement to retrieve his piglin son, who was now actively trying to scale Schlatt like a ladder for some reason.

“He wants to touch your horns.”

Tubbo's voice was curt and cut across the dead quiet like a sonic boom, surprising nearly everyone with how sudden it had come out. Schlatt looked down at Michael, who was making grabby motions with his hands, speaking in what Schlatt could only assume to be piglin. He looked back up to Tubbo, who continued to stare at him with scrutiny. He was watching Schlatt, seeing what he would do, and if the apprehension that flowed off Tubbo in waves was anything to go by, he was nervous as to what the ram would do next. So, steadily, he lowered himself to the piglin's height, making sure to keep his hands visible to let everyone know that he was completely empty-handed.

Michael made an assortment of happy grunts and snorts, running his small, gloved hands down the grooved cartilage of Schlatt's horns, tracing its curved shape multiple times and knocking on the horns to test if they were hollow, which they weren't. He even once or twice tugged on them as if to test if they were really real, and anytime he did that, Schlatt heard the sound of a sword sliding slightly out of a sheathe. A warning not to try anything.

The piglin even touched his ears at one point, and when they flicked involuntarily the piglin erupted into a fit of giggles. It made Schlatt smile for a moment, and when he looked back to Tubbo, the teenager had still not moved. However, his expression had become conflicted, confused as to the out-of-character behavior Schlatt was displaying.

They all stayed like that for another minute or so until Michael had gotten bored, turning heel and running back over to Tubbo with his arms outstretched. Tubbo picked him up seamlessly, dropping the picnic basket to hold him in a protective way while the piglin snuggled into his shoulder. He didn't break his gaze with Schlatt, as if still trying to see when he would drop the whole act and start throwing bottles or cursing out Tubbo. Or maybe it was to try and prove he wasn't the same stuttering secretary he had left behind, because even as panic swamped his whole body language he refused to let his eyes avert from Schlatt's. He was just as determined to show no weakness as he was unnerved, and that sent a short spark of admiration through Schlatt's chest.

Schlatt stood up, dusting off the snow that had been kicked up on him in Michael's leaving wake before stuffing his hands in the pockets of his fur coat, trying to relax the best he could so that maybe, just maybe, it wouldn't feel so stiff and awkward.

It didn't do shit, but you can't blame Schlatt for trying.

“Who's the kid you got there?”

There was going to be a god-awfully long night ahead of him.

Chapter End Notes

i live for the platonic marriage arc and michael. also, pain. i feel only pain. you have no idea how hard it was to write that wilbur part and just leave it the way it was, or else this chapter would've been another 5,000 words long lmao.

michael in this is 5 years old. baby boy. my beloved. i am weak for that child.

anyways, i'll see y'all in the next installment!

It's A New Life

Chapter Notes

ayo that fundy stream??? it only fuels the reasons fundy is my most relatable character in the SMP

anyways, 12,660 words, cry about it, please read tw warnings this time because i put everyone including myself through the emotional rollercoaster that is this chapter but i make up for it in michael interactions because he is now the backbone of this fic

!!TW WARNINGS: Past Abuse, Minor Self-Harm, Mentions of Alcoholism, Detailed Panic Attack, Mentions of Potential Injuries and also Character Death!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was another turbulent evening in the PogTopia ravine.

Techno had left that morning to go on a supply run, meaning Tommy had been left alone with Wilbur most of the day. Up until around dinner, it had been completely fine, and honestly maybe even better than it had been the past week. Wilbur was... he wasn't well, but it seemed worse when Techno was present. Wilbur had a few particular opinions about their older sibling, which he disclosed to Tommy regularly behind Techno's back, and none of them were much better than the last:

“He’s so pompous with that cape and crown, don’t you think?”

“Techno thinks he’s so much better than me just because he can wave around a stupid piece of metal slightly better.”

“I wish he would go fuck off back to Phil, it’s not he cares about us anyways.”

“He’s just a blade. A weapon for us to wield, Toms.”

Those were just the mild ones.

Whenever the piglin-hybrid wasn't present, Wilbur was at least manageable. Sure, he had become

rather paranoid since exile, but such was to be expected. Tommy always felt like looking over his shoulder, like someone was watching him or he was being followed. It had even been hard speaking to Tubbo after he was taken into Schlatt's cabinet, but all was forgiven after Tubbo swore he had no idea of the employment tactic, and even pledged allegiance to PogTopia as a spy. It was perfectly normal to feel cautious after such a traumatic event, anyways.

What was not normal, Tommy decided, was Wilbur's obsessive idea that everyone was out to get them.

Tommy dismissed his brother's behavior at first, brushing it off as leftover anxiety from being booted from their home country. But once he began to accuse Techno of double-agency, that's when Tommy began to worry for Wilbur.

As time went on, and they spent months in the ravine, Wilbur only got more and more bipolar. He'd go from full-blown monologuing about how they were the ones with the upper hand, how they were morally superior and that L'Manberg would soon again be theirs, to completely apathetic, lying in bed for days, playing the guitar half-heartedly or just staring at a wall. Those were the days when PogTopia was the quietest, and they were also the days when Tommy would be stuck at Wilbur's bedside, letting him ramble on and on about how much he missed Fundy or letting him hug Tommy while he quietly cried.

It genuinely pained Tommy to see his older brother, the person who had taken care of him since he could first remember, the man who had fought a war so they could have an independent home that was free of rule, and the leader who inspired Tommy in so many ways, tearing apart at the seams. He didn't think it was right. It wasn't. And he hated that he couldn't do anything else, because in retrospect, he was just a kid. He couldn't have done a better job even if he tried. Wilbur was beyond a brotherly hug and some uplifting words, no, he needed professional help. Something neither of them could afford or seek out, as Wilbur refused to leave PogTopia unless absolutely necessary, and Tommy as a result was tied down because leaving Wilbur usually resulted in disaster.

For example, this evening:

Wilbur had made dinner with what food they had left, which was mostly farmed potatoes and a couple bottles of water. And so, it was roasted potatoes and water. Not the most appetizing meal he's ever had, but Tommy knew not to complain. It had been worse before, he assured himself, but that was just his mind trying to sugarcoat the depressing reality they both lived in.

They ate in silence with forks scraping against plates monotonously, the sound echoing through the open cavern they sat in. Somehow, Wilbur had managed to get an old set of chairs and a table into PogTopia, though they were considerably uncomfortable. Wilbur said they were a gift from Niki, but Tommy had suspicion that he had just gotten them from a dumpster by the way they smelled.

*Tommy had been building up his courage for the past couple days, trying to find a proper opportunity to ask Wilbur if he could go visit Tubbo on his own. It had been ages since Tommy had properly hung out with his best friend, just the two of them, and he felt as though he deserved it. After all, he had been nothing but helpful, with maybe a few instances of Tommy being a little bit annoying (the decorating incident is something Tommy would never live down), so why **SHOULDN'T** he be allowed to get a little break for a day?*

It would also give him the chance to tell Tubbo about Wilbur's worsening mental state. Maybe then, he could get some outside help for his brother. Now that Techno had gone and Wilbur was in a particularly good mood that day, Tommy saw it as a 'now-or-never' chance. He put his fork down on the old wood table, taking a deep breath before blurting out his question.

"Can I go see Tubbo?"

It had come out just a little eager and nervous, but he shook off the embarrassment and straightened up in his seat. Wilbur froze, pausing mid-chew while the cogs in his mind spun for a moment. He returned back to eating, however, with a cold response that took Tommy by surprise.

"Why would you want to?"

Tommy let out a forced chuckle, smiling sheepishly as he stared at Wilbur, who hadn't looked up from his food. "Well, we haven't really gotten to hang out for a bit, I suppose. It would be nice to get out of the ravine for a couple hours, just a couple. I'd be back whenever you wanted, it could be like when we were younger-."

***"Don't talk about the past Toms, it's meaningless now,"** Wilbur kept the same cold tone, the level of calm he possessed in each word being almost as scary as him looking up at Tommy, burning intensity within his eyes that challenged Tommy's will. And unfortunately in this case, Tommy never backs down from his convictions or his goals.*

"Ok, ok, that's fine, but Wilbur, c'mon big man, just for a few hours? We'd have a picnic or something in the woods, far from anyone who could see us. We'll be safe, and Tubbo won't be found out for being a spy. All's good!"

***"He's already been found out, Toms,"** Wilbur said casually, setting down his fork and leaning back in his chair, crossing his arms.*

"W-What? Then we need to go get him, bring him back here so he's safe-!"

Tommy didn't like the grin that grew on Wilbur's face as Tommy panicked, or the chuckle that caused Tommy's words to trail off as he stared dumbly at his older brother. "What's so funny? This is serious, Wilbur!"

Wilbur only laughed more, before suddenly cutting it off to speak in a deadly tone, one that Tommy had only heard him ever use with Techno when he was annoyed with the piglin.

"Don't you get it? Tubbo is a double agent. I figured it out, and now he won't be able to pass off

reliable information anymore,” Wilbur looked so smug, his tone shifting completely as he continued, much more lighthearted and endearing. “Now, he won’t be able to try and pin us against each other, and we can get on with the real plan!”

Tommy felt gobsmacked by this. He knew that Wilbur had been less and less trusting, but he never thought he would accuse someone he literally raised alongside Tommy as a traitor. Tubbo had shown nothing but loyalty to Wilbur and the rebellion cause; he had even dug tunnels from L’Manberg to the ravine so they had a better way to get to one another without risking being caught! Tubbo could never betray them like that.

And so then, an argument broke out. Tommy defended Tubbo. Wilbur tried to reason with Tommy, but his reasons were unfounded and had no spine to them other than Wilbur’s ‘gut’. Tommy had asked his question once more and was met with an enraged Wilbur, who stood up so suddenly he had knocked his chair over in the process, one of the legs snapping off. Tommy raised his voice, his feelings about the way Wilbur was acting pouring out all at once. Wilbur also raised his voice, accusing Tommy of countless things: wanting to abandon him, running off with Tubbo, conspiring with Techno behind his back, and a whole lot more that made Tommy really consider how far gone Wilbur actually was. It was a whole lot of shouting, and eventually the rickety table had been flipped by Wilbur, Tommy standing up to avoid the impact but still continuing to argue.

“You are not visiting that fucking traitor, and that’s the end of it!”

“No, Wilbur, I’ve spent literal weeks down here! I need a change of scenery for a minute, I need to see someone other than you and Techno, so I’m going!”

“Why? Am I not enough for you?!”

“Wilbur, as much as I love you, I need to see other people! Maybe you can visit Niki-?”

“No, no! She’s a traitor, they are all traitors, Tommy! Why can’t you see that? Why are you such an ignorant child?!”

“TUBBO IS NOT A TRAITOR, WILBUR!”

“WHY DO YOU WANT TO LEAVE ME SO BAD?!”

“BECAUSE YOU’RE FUCKING INSANE!”

It had escalated all too quickly. Tommy had been too close. Wilbur was blinded in rage.

When the chair leg had snapped off a few minutes prior, it had made an audible CRACK which rang throughout the cavern.

When a second CRACK was heard, it was skin slapping against skin, Wilbur now standing over Tommy, who was lying on the ground in a daze. Hissing out his next words, Wilbur glared down at his little brother with potent loathing, and with each word that crawled into Tommy's ear, it only made the sting on his face burn all the more painfully; except now it wasn't completely physical.

“You’re never gonna be president, Tommy.”

It took them both a full minute to process the entire ordeal, Wilbur's expression switching from one of frustration to horror and Tommy lightly running his fingers over the tender part of his cheek, which would undoubtedly bruise. All that ran through Tommy's mind at that moment was the repulsive realization:

That Wilbur had hit him.

*Wilbur had **hit** him.*

When they locked eyes, Wilbur went to move, but Tommy was already scrambling up and dashing away, Wilbur following behind in a fit of unrelenting apologies.

“Wait wait wait wait, Toms, I'm sorry! Come back, wait, let's talk this out!”

Tommy ducked into his makeshift room, which was really just a carved out part of the ravine with a door to give him some privacy. It was nothing but cold stone walls and a sad sleeping bag tucked into the corner, only a few books and quills lying around and one dim lantern as décor. Still, Tommy slammed the door on his brother's face, locking it behind him before sliding down against the wood, panting heavily as he listened to Wilbur jiggle the doorknob frantically.

He jumped and covered his mouth to conceal a frightened squeak as the door began to get pounded on by Wilbur, his pleas slightly muffled by the door that separated them. Tommy felt tears welling up in his eyes, shutting them tightly as he crawled to the furthest corner of the room and curled into a ball. Enduring his brother's tantrum, flinching with every violent knock, he was afraid that Wilbur was gonna break down the door at some point.

He was afraid of Wilbur, if he was being honest with himself.

“Tommy, open this door! Open it right now!”

“I just want to talk, I’m really sorry!”

“I didn’t mean to hit you, Toms, I just got so angry and I wasn’t thinking!”

“Please open the door! Please Tommy, I need to make sure you’re okay!”

“Toms, please, it’s Wilbur! Wilby, your big brother! I never meant to hurt you! Please, just open the fucking door!”

Tommy didn’t know when Wilbur had finally stopped, but he was keenly aware of distant screaming and the sound of things breaking, Wilbur’s temper tantrum coming to a climax that he luckily didn’t have to witness.

He didn’t leave his room for the rest of the night, but Wilbur returned to his door after he had lost the will to destroy everything in his path. Tommy heard him slide against it, and then the choked sobs that usually followed an angry outburst like this. Usually, such events were aimed at Techno or their living situation, which Tommy could deal with because most of the time, he just holed up in his room like how he was currently. Now that it had been directed at him, though, he wasn’t sure whether to feel terrified or angry himself. He certainly felt guilty letting his brother suffer mere feet away from him, but he still couldn’t bring himself to help him yet. He did just smack Tommy in the face, after all.

Wilbur would speak sometimes in between fits of crying, the rest just blubbery and incoherent mumbling.

“I’m so sorry, Toms. I didn’t mean what I said.”

“I’m a horrible brother.”

“Why do I always end up hurting people I care about?”

“I’ll never forgive myself for hurting you.”

“Please open the door.”

It wasn’t until hours had passed, when Wilbur had mostly calmed himself and Tommy decided he couldn’t sleep soundly that he crept to the door, gently unlocking and creaking it open slowly to give Wilbur warning.

Wilbur had wrapped him in a giant hug instantaneously, one that Tommy struggled to return as his instincts told him to run. He couldn’t in good conscience, though, not when Wilbur was hiccuping out apologies for what felt like the millionth time and promising to let Tommy go see Tubbo as soon as he would like. Not when Wilbur had let Tommy stay in his room, which had an actual bed in it, and brought him ice packs along with the last of the water they had left to make sure Tommy was comfortable. Not when Wilbur had lulled him to sleep with a guitar-sung lullaby Tommy hadn’t heard since he was seven or so, which made both of them unintentionally emotional. Not when he woke up and Tubbo was already in the ravine, chatting with Techno as he cleaned up some of the leftover mess from last night, the piglin unloading some resources he returned with.

*He wasn’t a bad person, this is what Tommy knew for a fact. Wilbur just needed help. He was still Tommy’s brother, and somewhere in the murky water of madness Wilbur drowned in, the man Tommy had been raised by was locked away. Tommy was so sure he had the key, or at least the tools to break Wilbur out from the prison of his own mind. And so, Tommy couldn’t bring himself to leave him alone, no matter how much he sometimes feared that Wilbur was going to hurt him, or himself. He also couldn’t bring himself to admit that this was manipulation, blatant manipulation, and whether or not Wilbur intended it was overshadowed by the fact it was still **manipulation** .*

*He did realize Wilbur’s dependency on him became tenfold after that incident, and it wasn’t healthy for either of them in the slightest. He still treated Tommy with care and tact he had always known for, making it even harder to think about leaving him, but it was Wilbur’s hovering behavior that made it unbearable for the teenager. If Tommy was out of his sight for a few minutes without telling him where he was going, Wilbur would get distressed. He’d sleep right outside of Tommy’s room sometimes, a sword in limp hand as he lightly snored against the stone wall. Anytime he wanted to do anything outside, Wilbur would have to tag along, lest Tommy wanted to come back to a brooding brother. He practically hung off of Tommy most of the time, rambling on about his former presidential duties, telling Tommy how to go about handling press and rumors, and other such things Tommy usually would’ve been stoked to listen to; however it was all soured by how **clingy** Wilbur was.*

He didn’t hate Wilbur; far from it, in fact. But that didn’t mean Tommy didn’t wish that Wilbur would go away sometimes. Far, far away to give him room, so he could breathe his own fucking air for a change.

It was one of the many things that drove a wedge between them and their relationship, and there wasn’t much Tommy could do but either indulge Wilbur or directly oppose him, neither which were at all a good option for his spiraling brother who could flip from playful banter to deadly fury within seconds.

To note, Wilbur never raised another hand at Tommy. Not once.

It didn't matter, though, because the fear had been deep-seated in Tommy. The fear that grew when he watched his best-friend get executed and he was forced to watch silently, that grew when Wilbur told Tommy he had allied with Dream, that grew when his brother raved about blowing up their home with no remorse in his tone (it disgusted Tommy when he thought Wilbur even sounded excited about the prospect), that grew when Wilbur gave up the Presidency so quickly, too quickly, to Tommy.

He couldn't handle that fear, because deep-down, he was terrified of Wilbur. It was no longer the cautious fear he had dealt with the days that followed after Wilbur had smacked him, no, it was unadulterated terror at the thought of Wilbur continuing to keep his iron-clad hold on Tommy's life. He wasn't Tommy's brother that he knew from the caravan, nor the president or valiant leader he had so desperately tried to save over the past months. No, he was gone, completely gone, and in his stead stood a man driven by his selfish ideals and self-loathing, who clung to Tommy and treated him more and more like a pet than a brother everyday that went by in that stupid ravine. He treated Tommy as if he were the only person he had left, as if he didn't have an insanely cool older brother or an equally amazing father or Niki or literally all of his friends he had left behind in L'Manberg that would be just as good for conversation as Tommy was.

And frankly, by that point, Tommy had enough as he stood up on the podium, looking out over the crowd that had formed beneath.

He was bitter.

He needed to rebel, something he had been denied ever since the start of exile.

So, he finally lashed out the only way he knew how to, and he would never forget the betrayed look on Wilbur's face as he rejected the Presidency.

It wasn't Wilbur, not the real one at least, who handed him the responsibility, and since this current Wilbur went against everything Tommy had known his brother to stand for (like structured government and fighting for what you believe in), he couldn't accept it from him. When he announced it, it both hurt and scared him as his older brother glowered up at him, all of the brimming pride he had was suddenly drained from his face. It did not solicit the inner response Tommy had been hoping for, which was satisfaction for being able to reject Wilbur for the first time in months. They bumped shoulders harshly while Wilbur begrudgingly took to the podium once more, declaring Tubbo as the next president before completely disappearing from the festivities.

This Wilbur had told Tommy he would never be president after all; and he was right.

Tommy thought that it would get rid of his fear as well, that maybe focusing on his disc conflict and allowing his much more capable friend to take his spot would make him forget everything. Phil would be on his way soon enough to pick up Techno, and Tommy could see if their father could get through to Wilbur. Maybe he could take Wilbur with him, and find him some help that they didn't have in the SMP. Tommy could finally be free of his suffocating grip and try to move on with life, something he had been praying for since that night Wilbur had struck him.

He never got that chance, and his fear turned to partial regret as he watched his brother's diamond blade slide through his chest, their own father on the other end of the hilt in horror. Tommy held a barely breathing Tubbo in his arms, surrounded and choking on the smog created by the absolute desecration of L'Manberg while people he knew and civilians shouted in panic, and from a distance he could hear Dream triumphantly celebrating.

In this deafening commotion that surrounded the teenager, he himself screamed out for his older brother. For the first and what would be the last time for awhile, Tommy allowed himself to feel grief, letting sobs cascade over his body while he watched the life leave Wilbur for a final time. Phil let out a bird-like screech of pain after Wilbur stopped breathing, one that silenced the world for a moment and one that Tommy would never forget until he himself took his last breath.

Wilbur was gone. He had never been absent a day in Tommy's life, and as much as he had become toxic, a hole in the blonde's heart formed. Out of guilt, or grief, or anger, maybe even a mixture of all three, he couldn't decide. All he knew was that it was one that was deep and unpatchable, and would only grow with each day he woke up and his brother wasn't there to guide and protect him and Tubbo and Fundy from the wickedness of the world. He had even found himself wishing to go back to the days where Wilbur would never leave him alone, because to Tommy, he'd take back that crazy bastard over not having him at all. He had been a shield for all of them, a bastion of wisdom and a force to be reckoned with, even in his crazed mental state. It only took mere weeks until Tommy, Fundy and Tubbo were getting taken advantage of, and had Wilbur been there still, maybe things would be different. But he wasn't, and it was them who suffered and broke apart. They blamed each other until Fundy had drifted away from Tubbo and Tommy completely, and the dynamic duo began to see mirrored reflection of the deceased in each other.

*Tommy could speak for the majority in their family that nothing could fill that void left behind in the wake of his brother's death: nothing but Wilbur himself. But even then, he had been gone long before he took his final breath, something that slowly burned in that hole of Tommy's heart. That slowburn was called guilt, something he never disclosed to anyone about feeling, because in the dark corners of his mind he did partially blame himself for Wilbur's death. If he had just reached out more, tried harder, been more attentive; if Tommy just had more **time** to get through to Wilbur.*

But there was no more time to help his big brother, and that is what Tommy regretted the most about that fateful day.

####

Falling from a building was not an optimal way to reach the ground, Tommy discovered as he plummeted towards the concrete below, the wind just loud enough rushing past his ears to drown out the blood-curdling screams coming from the Prime Path.

Tommy would argue later that he meant to fall off the building, that he had a water bucket at the ready and he would be fine because it wasn't anything he hadn't done before in reckless fits of impatience. Except for the fact, he *didn't* have a water bucket, nor was he being recklessly impatient. No, he was more-so caught off-guard from being called for by his big brother: who was supposed to be dead.

Of course, that thought wasn't Tommy's first concern at the moment, as he was getting a little too close to the ground for comfort and flailed mid-air as he tried to grip onto anything that would halt his descent. His hands only grasped at air, and as he passed the second level of the hotel at an alarmingly accelerated speed, he could only yell out curses and brace himself for the impending snap of his spine on the hard cement below.

"FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK-!" Tommy squinted his eyes and pulled his knees to his chest, hoping that if anything, this would be a quick death. He pressed his face into his knees and covered the back of his neck with his hands, completely balling himself up as terror ran wantonly through his body.

Anti-climatically, however, Tommy never got to hear the splitting crack of his bones, and his terror quickly turned to embarrassment as he was caught by a pair of metal arms, which didn't even stutter underneath the teen's sudden weight. Of course there was a dull pain from the metal colliding with Tommy's kinetic force, but the teen much preferred it over the less desirable option.

Tommy curled from his fetal-like position as the being set him onto his feet. He stumbled for a moment before whipping around to meet his savior, who was no other than Sam Nook, giving Tommy nothing more than the emotionless stare he usually gave Tommy.

Sam Nook held a strong resemblance to actual Sam, which made sense when Tommy learned Sam literally casted a mold of himself to make the robot. He looked fairly human, even having synthetic skin and hair to match, however that's about where the familiarity stopped. Nook's eyes with simple lights, which could turn from the regular white to red or blue, depending on the robot's mode. White was NPC mode, which was when Nook would give Tommy tasks and build and such. Red was Defensive mode, in which Nook would go to any length to keep Tommy and those he considered friends safe, and since he lacked his maker's moral conscience, it wouldn't faze the robot to kill for the teen (not that Tommy particularly condoned it). Blue, which was the color Nook displayed at the moment, was Stand-By mode. All it really meant was the robot was watching Tommy, or watching the area around the Hotel in case Defensive mode was necessary.

Jumbled sounds came spewing from the speakers of the gas mask he wore, similar to real Sam's, except instead of just being black, it was stark orange that matched the vest he wore overtop a tropical hawaiian shirt. Clashing styles, Tommy had once pointed out, but it kinda worked for the bot.

On a small screen that had been built onto the gas mask, the illuminated words, '*TOMMYINNIT, YOU MUST BE MORE CAREFUL WHEN AT HIGH POINTS OF THE BIG INNIT HOTEL*' ran across staggeredly, giving Tommy enough time to read it out before flashing Nook the finger, which didn't faze the bot in the slightest.

“I am the most careful, thank you very much, Sam Nook! I would’ve been fine, you didn’t need to catch me!” Tommy began, the defiance bubbling into his throat as the embarrassed flush on his cheeks only reddened. It reminded Tommy of when he got scolded or told off by Wilbur, the idea of having his errors pointed out by someone-.

Wilbur.

Tommy never grew paler so fast in his entire life, and suddenly it was like the world had stopped revolving when he heard near-by voices just down the path. He made the mistake of looking, just as he had when he stood on top of the roof, and all of his previous thoughts were thrown out of the window when he saw the small group that had formed some ways down the Prime Path.

He could make out Ranboo first, looking back and forth between Tommy and the rest of the group while gripping a sword tightly, even though he looked as if a gust of wind would knock him over. Puffy was next to him, no longer sitting atop Wilbur’s back and instead straining her eyes to see Tommy, probably to check and see if he’s ok after his close call.

Then, it was Fundy, who was poorly attempting to calm down a hysterical Wilbur as he hugged his dad, Tommy’s older brother, and tried to shush him best he could despite looking completely bewildered by his behavior. Wilbur, a person Tommy still wasn’t sure if he was real or a ghost, had his face hidden in his hands and his forehead pressed against Fundy’s chest, shoulders shaking with sobs and vocals completely shredded from his prior screaming.

Tommy knew it couldn’t be Ghostbur. No, Ghostbur was quiet, bubbly and idiotic at times, but one of his defining features was that his voice rarely rose above the melocholic echo he spoke so softly with. Even at the last stand in L’Manberg, when Ghostbur verbally berated Phil for his flawed logic and cursed him for allowing friend to die, his voice still echoed, still contained that cracking positivity and kindness that only Ghostbur could muster in such a scene. Because, at the end of the day, Ghostbur was gentle; a little foggy-headed, but he meant well, although it wouldn’t have hurt for him to be a little more firm instead of constantly indecisive (though, with the amnesia, Tommy and the rest never held it against the poor guy).

The voice that shrieked shrilly into the night was nothing Ghostbur could muster, and was much more akin to the sobs Tommy would hear when he lived in the PogTopia ravine. That thought alone made his skin crawl and brought back flashes of memories he didn’t wish to recall at the moment, Dream’s mask and Wilbur’s infuriated face meshing together until his head hurt trying to differentiate who was who.

He was brought from his thoughts when he felt a firm hand on his shoulder. Looking up a considerable amount, Tommy’s blue eyes met Ranboo’s bi-colored ones, the enderman-hybrid flashing him a tight-lipped smile that did nothing to soothe Tommy’s headache, or his confusion, or his nervousness. In fact, it did quite the opposite as Tommy pulled from Ranboo’s grounding hand and pushed past him, picking up his walk into a full-on sprint as he ran from the hotel site and towards the spot the rest of the group was.

Tommy could hear Ranboo make a startled noise before chasing after him. “Tommy, w-wait a second!” The enderman called out from behind him, but Tommy knew if Ranboo really wanted to stop him, he could easily overtake him in stride with his ridiculously long legs. So, Tommy simply took that as encouragement that, yes, he was very much allowed to investigate what the hell was going on.

Once Puffy saw him coming, though, she was quick to stand in his path, making Tommy skid to a halt as to avoid completely crashing into her. He wasn't an asshole. Sometimes.

Holding out her hands like Tommy was some kind of wild animal, she spoke calmly, but in the authoritative way that Tommy despised hearing from any adult, regardless if he liked them. "Tommy, listen, I know what's going through your head right now-."

Tommy also didn't like when adults tried to tell him what he was thinking.

"Like hell you do, Puffy! Let me through!" He made an attempt to slip past her, but she only took his hands in hers, pretty much locking him in place due to her firm grip. It was almost motherly, not that Tommy would know what 'motherly' would feel like, though he assumed by the way he was somewhat relaxed and his mind calmed for a moment, that it could be an effect mothers have. She looked up at Tommy, eyes full of concern and sympathy, and it made Tommy quiet down a considerable amount as he looked down at his tattered sneakers.

He was still confused. Still afraid, still unapologetically rash with his words, but at least Puffy was trying to comfort him in this messy situation he found himself roped into.

"Puffy," He began with a shaky breath, looking over her head to Fundy, who was still awkwardly cradling his brother in his arms. The fox had caught sight of him at this point, but made no effort to call out to him. Frankly, Tommy knew it was for the best. He hoped his older brother would just pass out from exhaustion. Then, Tommy would have more time to find the adequate words he wanted to say to Wilbur, more time to sort out his ignored feelings and opinions into order, more time to plan out being angry and spiteful towards him as Tommy rightfully should be. "I-Is that... really Wilbur?"

Despite what Tommy knew what he should feel like, he couldn't bring himself to actually feel angry. He couldn't and that made him frustrated, so frustrated even that he could feel his eyes becoming wet from the overwhelming shame he felt for *not* feeling furious.

Really, though, it wasn't *truly* frustration, because Tommy was never honest with himself.

He was upset that there was no time to get angry, and that all time had left with him was waves and waves of guilt he never bothered to confront. The guilt that followed him in the form of Ghostbur, so sickly sweet and a constant reminder of Wilbur when Tommy was little, now lost to time and replaced with a caricature that accidentally mocked Tommy's memories. The guilt he felt when L'Manberg had been destroyed for the final time, allowing Wilbur's legacy to die in another explosive catastrophe Tommy could've prevented better despite only being one person. The guilt he saw when Tubbo tried to let himself die just for Tommy to be happy with his discs, and the guilt that hit him like a lightning bolt when his best friend hugged him in a rib-cracking hold, like it really was the last time they would ever see each other. Tommy almost allowed another brother's death to be his fault, and it was utter shame that fell over him when Wilbur appeared at the bench

to tell him how proud he was.

Why would Wilbur be proud, especially of Tommy?

It confused him. It felt so backhanded and undeserving for the teen, and was incredibly unsatisfying despite how he played it off to be. Even in their spur-of-the-moment banter, he still couldn't get past the fact everything felt so utterly backwards. Just as it had felt in PogTopia, just like it felt in exile, just like in the last L'Manberg war; but those comparisons only caused more unnecessary mental gymnastics for the teen to tumble through without coming off the mat with a broken leg, and even more questions.

Puffy squeezed his hands a little and Tommy had to blink away the blurriness that had clouded his vision, not realizing the warm tears escaping his eyes until they had run down his cheeks. He looked up to see her own eyes getting a little bit watery, and he tried to put on his false bravado for her sake, despite his real feelings already being put on display.

"Puffy," His voice cracked and he cleared his throat, carefully speaking despite the strain in his words. "I-Is... Is that W-Wilbur? Please tell m-me that's..." He wasn't sure if he was going to say 'not' or 'him', but it didn't matter because he had been shushed by Puffy herself, running her thumbs over his trembling knuckles.

"It is Wilbur, Tommy," Puffy said softly. "He... He came back this morning."

Another realization dawned on Tommy.

Blinking a few times as he processed what she said, he drew his hands away from hers and she let them go easily. "He... This *m-morning*?" Tommy said, and Puffy knew she had made a mistake when Tommy gave her an incredulous look, almost completely masking his previous upset expression.

".. Yes, we-."

"Who's *we*?" Tommy snapped, finally finding something to get riled up about, something that could make him ignore himself for a minute more. "B-Because last I checked, I wasn't notified of a-a resurrection event."

"Tommy-," Puffy tried to reach out and touch his arm comfortingly, but Tommy flinched from her, taking a step back.

"No, Puffy, what the a-actual *hell*? Y-You can't just fucking *REVIVE* someone and not tell their loved ones! Why wasn't I invited?!" Tommy looked over at Fundy before pointing and glaring back at Puffy, his words on the verge of a snarl. "What, did you let Fundy be there? Why did he get notified, huh? Last I fucking checked, he didn't want *ANYTHING* to do with Wilbur!" Tommy saw Fundy's ears flatten against his hat, and he would've felt bad for his nephew if he wasn't already preoccupied being pissed at everyone.

"Tommy, he wasn't there. It was me, Sam, Ranboo, and Connor. That's it," Puffy tried to reason

with him, but Tommy felt like all he saw was red at this point, fuming practically out of his ears.

“Oh, so instead of having a familiar face there, you bring practical *STRANGERS* to be the first thing he wakes up to! Real fucking brilliant, Puffy, couldn’t have thought of a better solution!” Tommy spat sarcastically, crossing his arms.

“We didn’t know what he was gonna be like when he woke up, and we still don’t know if it’s safe for others, especially you and Fundy, to be around him-.”

It felt like a shaken cola can, and someone had just popped off the cap.

“HE’S MY GODDAMN BROTHER, PUFFY! HE WAS PROBABLY SO FUCKING CONFUSED AND SCARED OUT OF HIS MIND, REGARDLESS OF WHO HE CAME BACK AS! ME AND FUNDY ARE ALREADY FUCKED UP, I DOUBT TRYING TO HELP HIM ADJUST WOULD FUCKING KILL US, BECAUSE AT LEAST HE WOULDN’T FEEL LIKE WE ABANDONED AND GAVE UP ON HIM AGAIN!”

“Toms?”

####

This was absolutely not allowed to happen in front of Michael, Tubbo decided as he held his piglin son in his arms, staring down the ram-hybrid he still didn’t want to believe was real.

Tubbo wanted to run and hide, he wanted to scream, he wanted to panic, because that was the default setting when you come face to face with your abusive ex-boss. It’s not like he didn’t see the expectant look in everyone’s gaze, Schlatt included, like they were waiting for Tubbo to faint in shock so that they could get this entire ordeal over with. On any other given day, he would’ve gratefully done so, because then that meant he didn’t have to confront anyone further, and hopefully the problem would resolve itself or he’d wake up and it would turn out to be some bad fever dream.

Except for the fact Michael was present. Michael didn’t deserve to see his dad collapse suddenly, or watch him struggle to breathe, or start yelling obscenities at someone Michael had just met and connected with positively (as much as it made shivers run down Tubbo’s spine). Tubbo would never let something as traumatic as that happen to him if he could prevent it.

So, he sucked it up and braved the terror that stood before him, who blocked his path from where he stood to his house.

“Who’s the kid you got there?”

The voice alone made Tubbo flinch, hating that the rough tone was almost innocent sounding, as if Schlatt cared. Tubbo wouldn't buy it for a second, but for Michael's sake, he had to play nice. He mustered up his courage to speak levelly, clearing his throat before finally averting his eyes from Schlatt's to the ground simply out of bad habit, not having the same adrenaline he had when he told Schlatt what Michael wanted from him.

“His name is Michael.”

On cue almost, the piglin peeked his face out from Tubbo's shoulder before shyly tucking it away again, wrapping his small arms around Tubbo's neck a little tighter. It was adorable, and very much a moment he and Ranboo would've been fawning over if it were any other time than now.

When he looked back up to Schlatt, the small grin that appeared on his face felt like a direct kick to Tubbo's patience. It looked plastic, just like all of Schlatt's expressions usually were, besides when he was completely wasted or resorted to his stoic mannerisms when not in the public's eye. That hadn't changed about the ram, unlike the devil-red horns he sported, along with milk-white goat ears that poked out dorkishly from the curve of said horns. Then again, why would Tubbo expect the emperor to have changed at all? He still had no idea why he was even here, HOW he was even here, but at least the one thing Tubbo could be sure of was that Schlatt was bad news, regardless of the situation.

Schlatt shifted from foot to foot, looking over his shoulder for a moment at SnowChester before turning back to Tubbo. “And the town?”

“SnowChester,” Tubbo responded quickly. Michael began to tug on his yellow-cow ear that peeked out from a hole in his trapper's hat. Normally, he would've asked for the toddler to not do it, but the odd comforting feeling it gave Tubbo allowed him to let it slide just this once. “I made it after L'Manberg blew up.”

Schlatt hummed, looking down from Tubbo's stare as he kicked the snow in front of him. “Yeah. You kicked some fucking ass though, bud. Sorry you lost it in the end, you did a great job rebuilding it, shame it all went to waste.”

...

“What?”

It was the response that came from Tubbo, Sam, and Connor at the same time, the silently agreed upon feeling of shock painting their single, shared word. Foolish was just plain confused, but he was at least on the same spectrum as the rest of them.

Schlatt looked up from the ground to Tubbo, then looked behind him to the rest of the group before turning on his heel so he was facing both parties equally. He looked between them once more before sighing, crossing his arms over his chest. Tubbo could pinpoint the tired and annoyed grimace that fell upon his face, pinching the bridge of his nose like he was fighting a hangover

headache. He wondered if the ram still smelled like bourbon, or if he was under the influence, and that's why he was so sedated in his attitude.

"What is a ghost's favorite form of entertainment? Reality TV," The joke was lost on the group's humor, but the ram continued anyways. "Yeah, I could see everything going on, Wilbur, too. You guys just... couldn't see us."

"Wait, Wilbur is back?" Tubbo asked quickly, both excitement and anxiety meshing into one tone he spoke in. "H-He came back with you?"

Schlatt nodded, but before he could speak, Sam spoke up, walking closer to Schlatt as Connor and Foolish trailed behind. "That was the original plan, to bring back Wilbur and Wilbur only," If Schlatt flinched at the obvious subtext in Sam's explanation, he didn't show it. He didn't even seem fazed by the admission, only watching Sam as he spoke. "But when we had to involve Connor here, well, it got more complicated."

"So, you're telling me," Tubbo started, looking from Sam to Connor, who gave him a sheepish wave before lowering his gaze as bull-rage built in Tubbo's eyes. He still managed to keep his voice cool, but there was a noticeable restraint with each word as he lifted a free hand to gently pry Michael's hands from tugging on his ear again. "Connor is the reason that Schlatt is... alive?"

Sam nodded, adding, "It was a take-it or leave-it offer, and we really needed an ingredient from him."

"I apologize, Tubbo, I didn't know-."

"Foolish, will you do me a favor and take Michael home for me? He's gonna need dinner soon and I don't want him to be cranky before bed."

Tubbo cut Connor off completely, setting his son on his feet as Michael attempted to stay latched to Tubbo's neck. Foolish made his way over swiftly, and with his golden skin it didn't take much convincing before Michael was getting a piggy-back ride from him, completely forgetting about being in his dad's arms. Tubbo and the rest watched them go, not daring to speak another word until Foolish and Michael had disappeared into the moobloom's home.

There was another deafening silence that came over the group once more, and now with no blockades preventing Tubbo from his raw reactions, he balled his shaking fists until his knuckles turned pearl-white. His nose scrunched up and his eyes narrowed sharply, eyebrows creasing with fury, and when he looked back at everyone, he was the spitting image of what a raging bull would look like, minus the steam billowing from his ears.

"What in absolute GOD'S name were you THINKING?!" He shouted, not particularly at anyone, but Connor still responded as if he was the main target.

"I-I only knew Schlatt had died-."

"AND HE SHOULD'VE STAYED DEAD!" Tubbo interjected, motioning to Schlatt furiously, who again didn't flinch in the slightest at the teen's harsh words, only looking at him as he spoke. He glared at Sam, who wasn't surprised by Tubbo's outburst but did look away in guilt. "YOU OF ALL PEOPLE, SAM, SHOULD'VE BEEN AGAINST IT! YOU WITNESSED HIS TYRANNY, YOU KNOW WHAT HE DID TO EVERYONE, TO FUNDY, TO QUACKITY, TO *ME!*"

“Tubbo, I was against it, but-.”

“And why wasn’t I told about this?! Wilbur mattered to me just as much as he did for Fundy and Tommy, it would’ve been nice to have a heads-up!”

“We didn’t tell anyone because we didn’t know how they were gonna be when they were revived. We didn’t want to risk anyone getting potentially harmed,” Sam reasoned.

“Oh yeah, because bringing back an abusive alcoholic with a superiority-complex is definitely not gonna harm anyone after you ask him a couple check-up questions,” Tubbo snarled, his eyes switching from Sam’s to Schlatt’s.

He was perplexed that directly antagonizing the ram hadn’t even riled him up in the slightest. As much as Tubbo’s raw fury and disgruntlement with this whole situation he stumbled into was genuine, this was a test. Tubbo refused to trust Schlatt, that wouldn’t change for all the honey in the world, and in order to reaffirm that distrust, he needed Schlatt to act out. He needed him to yell at him, call him names back, threaten his house or his son or him, anything that could strengthen the already strong opinion he had about the ram.

Otherwise, how could he explain the ram’s out of character kindness towards Michael, allowing him to touch and pet Schlatt’s horns and ears? Or how he had such a gentle tone in the way he apologized for Tubbo’s loss in L’Manberg? The way he never once spoke over anyone who was talking, not trying to create his own narrative for everyone else to be subjected to? Never once glaring at Tubbo for speaking poorly of him, and instead, gave him looks of *understanding*?

He could just say it was his way of posing himself to be a changed man and getting a pass for everything he did in the past, and Tubbo would be able to call it a day. Yet, it still bothered Tubbo, because if Schlatt *was* trying to manipulate everyone, why wasn’t he making everyone feel bad for him? Tubbo couldn’t find an ulterior motive, at least not an obvious one, and that was what puzzled him.

Because if Schlatt wasn’t outright attempting to gaslight, that only really left the option that Schlatt *had* changed in one way or the other; something Tubbo refused to believe. So he would keep pushing and pushing until he could prove to himself Schlatt was still the same bastard he died as.

“What? Haven’t you got anything to say? You seem to be the hot topic of discussion, and you haven’t even said anything yet!” Tubbo prodded venomously, taking a few steps towards Schlatt with a renewed confidence. The ram made no signal to move from where he stood, watching Tubbo carefully but otherwise keeping his mouth shut. Sam went to stop Tubbo, but the teen shoved the man’s arms away as he sneered up at Schlatt, standing directly in front of him now.

“You’re only here because you probably want to rub it in my face, right? L’Manberg went down with your memory, your *dastardly* legacy, and then look who followed in your footsteps!” Tubbo laughed hollowly. He pressed a finger into the ram’s chest harshly, continuing to glare daggers into his brown eyes, an unreadable expression across his face while he listened to Tubbo. “You probably watched with pleasure. Tubbo, the second-pick president, making mistake after mistake until he finally watched his home crash and burn for one final time, right?!”

“Tubbo-.”

“No, no you listen to me for once!” Tubbo cut off Schlatt, drawing his finger from the ram’s chest and letting his hands ball at his sides tightly. Schlatt resigned quickly, not even opening his mouth to protest and he gave Tubbo a nod to continue after a short silence. Tubbo hadn’t expected for him to give the moobloom the floor that easily, but he continued despite the hiccup.

“You probably laughed at my failed presidency, right? I mean, who didn’t?! I exiled my best-friend, I imprisoned my father, I failed to execute a war-criminal, and I was just a push-over for Dream’s plans, right? I let Quackity control me half of the time, and I watched as my nation crumbled into nothing but a giant fucking hole, just like history wanted it to be! Oh look at Tubbo, the failure no one was surprised by! And you’d think after being in two previous administrations, I’d have a better handle of things!”

“Tubbo, you’re a *kid*.”

*“That didn’t matter to anyone! It still doesn’t matter! It’s not like it stopped you from ordering Technoblade to shoot me face-first with a **firework** !”*

###

Karma was the one of two plausible theories he had on why he just watched his little brother fall to his death.

The other was that he was actually in Hell, and this was just a long game of deception to twist Wilbur’s heart and pluck it from his chest for a delicious treat.

Everything felt like it was both in slow-motion and fast-forward, all of his senses delayed in reaction yet his mind and heart racing as if he was on a non-stop rollercoaster. Puffy had abandoned him on the path to run towards the hotel presumably, though that just gave Wilbur the chance to scramble to his knees, attempting to stand despite his entire body feeling like a deflated balloon and his arms nearly buckling beneath his weight, trembling violently. His mouth moved to curse his weakness, but he heard no sound escape his lips besides panicked wheezes.

His breathing had gotten to the point of feeble gasping, causing his lungs to feel on fire and his head completely lightheaded. With each short intake of air, he sounded like his throat had been coated in sandpaper, and Wilbur wasn’t surprised when he faintly tasted the metallic flavor of blood in the back of his mouth. His vision was clouded with gluttonous tears, obscuring the world around him in a thick and out-of-focus sheet as they shamelessly ran down his cheeks.

Before he could even try to make the wobbly risk of pushing himself up, he felt someone gingerly grab his shoulders, carefully pulling him into a hug he could not return as he curled in on himself. It felt disorienting to move, let alone let his eyes remain open any longer, so he pressed his hands into his face and dug his fingernails into his forehead harshly, all the while he could feel the vibrations of someone’s chest as they spoke. Whatever they were mumbling was lost on Wilbur’s ears, his hearing overtaken with the sound of his rapid heartbeat and his wheezing, each breath more airy and desperate than the last, few words escaping his blubbing sobs.

“I killed him oh god I killed Tommy-.”

His words were broken and scratchy, and his vocals indeed sounded like they had been put through a paper-shredder. It hurt to speak, but it was pain that at least deterred his train-of-thought from the events at hand slightly, even if it didn't stop his panic attack from reaching its climax.

He could barely feel the loose but comforting grip he was in as whoever held him tried to move his hands from his face, something warm trickling down from his temple and running between his fingers. His entire body felt frigid before he suddenly felt paralyzed, a wave of exhaustion overtaking him and finally auto-piloting Wilbur into unconsciousness as a last ditch effort to stop self-inflicted asphyxiation.

When he woke up, his entire body felt tingly and cold, while a headache formed instantaneously. A dull anxiety sat in the back of his aching mind, but he couldn't immediately recall what for. There were gentle pats on his damp face, and that's when he noticed Fundy staring at him with a startled expression, his mouth moving but the words were all disconnected as Wilbur's hearing slowly synced back with reality.

"Dad.. okay?... Dad, are... talk to me... *Wilbur?*"

Wilbur blinked slowly, lifting his hands to massage his temples but stopping abruptly when he saw blood staining his fingertips and streaking down into his palms. It only alarmed him more when he felt something akin to sweat roll down the center of his face, and when he went to wipe it away it only stained his hands red more.

How had he hurt himself? Was Fundy okay? What was happening-?

"It's okay, it's okay, everything is o-okay. I think you had a panic attack, Wilbur, so just try to breathe," Fundy reassured him quietly, Wilbur finally taking notice how his son had been holding him upright with one hand on his shoulder while the other wiped away at his forehead with his paw, keeping a respectable distance to give him room. Wilbur did as he was told, seeing how it at least made Fundy relax a bit as he took deep, painful breaths. His throat felt like an open wound, and with each breath it was like adding lemon juice mixed with medical peroxide. Still, it began to alleviate the headache he had, so he continued to torture his throat as a slow thought process began in his brain.

A panic attack? It had been awhile since one of those had happened to Wilbur. They were never pleasant, as was the universal opinion of panic attacks, and the only ones he can significantly remember happening was the first night in PogTopia and Tommy's attempted suicide during exile. He couldn't accurately pinpoint when they began and ended, but the-

Tommy.

Tommy.

Everything came back to him in full force, the last few moments before he had completely gone into panic mode was Tommy plummeting downwards, Wilbur screams cut short, and Puffy leaving him on the path, alone. Everything after that was a blur, but now that he could remember why he felt that nagging pit of anxiety in his stomach, he wished he was still knocked out.

But before he could get the chance to hyperventilate again, before more welling tears could pour guiltily down his face and Fundy would be forced to fruitlessly attempt to calm him down again, a heaven-sent voice filled the air behind him that caused him to still completely. It was unabashedly angry, shaken and brash, and that voice could only belong to one person that Wilbur knew.

Turning his head around to look over his shoulder, he wiped at his eyes and stared in awe at his baby brother, who was completely unharmed. He still wore the gaudy-colored vest over his iconic t-shirt, though the hard hat must've been lost on his way down from the hotel roof. He was glaring down at Puffy with damp eyes, tears freely running down his face despite the angered scrunch his face expressed and his hands moving with his words. The enderman-hybrid, Ranboo, stood behind Tommy, looking nervous as what to do to help.

It was an instant relief to see Tommy, but still his concerns outweighed any sort of logic or awareness he should've had before he gasped in a sore tone, "Toms?"

Apparently it had been loud enough to attract the attention of Tommy and Puffy, who looked back to him and Fundy. When his eyes met Tommy's, he could see the anger melt away as a conflicted feeling ran laps in his brother's eyes, staring at Wilbur with a far-away gaze.

Now with Wilbur on the spot, he didn't know what to do. It was the same feeling he had once his mind had cleared in Eret's castle and he froze up in front of Fundy. As much as Wilbur wanted to stand and throw open his arms to his little brother (there was a healthy amount of doubt that he could even do the first action), he knew that Tommy was different from Fundy. He wouldn't be surprised if Tommy would march over and kick him square in the jaw while he had the chance because that was just Tommy; lash out first, ask the important questions at the worst possible times.

So, the group sat in an uncomfortable silence, with only Wilbur's ragged breathing to accompany it. No one dared to speak, almost like they were all in knowing agreement that Tommy was to do so before anyone else had the chance. Wilbur took the time to turn his body towards him, revealing that he was still wearing the rebellion wear minus his beanie, and his shirt was still stained with aged, dried blood. Probably not his best first impression clothing he could've had.

Tommy stared Wilbur, giving a few up-down looks to take in the sight before him. It felt sort of akin to what Fundy had done, but with more intensity, more disbelief, and a newfound *guilt* that took Wilbur by surprise.

What did Tommy have to feel guilty for? Was it because Wilbur had panicked over him, or was it because Wilbur had hurt himself accidentally? Neither were his fault, though, so it perplexed Wilbur to no end, and in the back of his mind a small voice pressured Wilbur to ask.

Before he could however, Tommy cleared his throat, blinking before looking away from Wilbur, straightening his posture. Everyone tensed, Wilbur gulping and preparing himself for whatever was gonna come flying out of his brother's mouth. No matter what it would be, Wilbur knew he couldn't hold it against Tommy. He was most-likely and understandably overwhelmed, and Tommy tended to say a lot of things he didn't mean when he was emotional.

“... You have bird shit in your hair, y’know.”

The laugh that escaped Wilbur’s throat was more of a cough, but it seemed that Fundy had the same reaction, a quiet snicker coming from the fox behind him. That was not quite what Wilbur had been expecting, but then again, Tommy was the very much the definition ‘expect the unexpected’.

It eased Wilbur’s anxiety when he saw a shit-eating grin appear on Tommy’s face, the conflicted feeling still there but quelled somewhat by Wilbur’s positive reaction to his insult. Wilbur even quipped back, amusement dancing in his raspy and whisper-toned voice. “At least it isn’t that god-awful vest.”

Now it was Tommy’s turn to snort, Fundy and Wilbur also giggling at the unexpected banter forming between the family again. Puffy, looking between the trio, made the decision to step out of the way of Tommy, giving him a direct path to Wilbur and Fundy if he wanted to approach on his own terms. Tommy gave Puffy a questioning glance, to which she nodded and gave him a small smile.

Tommy turned his head back to Wilbur and Fundy, the grin fading as he weighed his options. Wilbur could tell how much he was debating, but he was patient. He was going to respect whatever Tommy chose to do, even if all Wilbur wanted to was hug him and beg him to never go near another roof ever again.

“I..” Tommy began to say, wringing one of his hands around the opposite wrist nervously, looking away from Wilbur once more to focus on something far-away in the distance. It was something that Wilbur had noticed he did more frequently after exile, his inability to look people in the eyes, which had concerned him and continues to, because Tommy never had a problem with doing so before he died. Wilbur was drawn from his thoughts, however, as Tommy continued. “So you’re... You’re not a ghost, then?”

Wilbur shook his head. “No, I’m completely whole.” As if to prove his point, he raised a hand and knocked it gently against his head. “See? It might be hollow up there, but I’m still here.”

Tommy let a small grin appear on his face at Wilbur’s joke. “Yeah, I’m not surprised that it’s hollow. You don’t have as big of an IQ as I do.”

“Well, I think you’ll be happy to hear I still haven’t lost my charming looks.”

“You look like shit.”

“Is that the only expletive/adjective you know?”

“No, it just accurately describes you.”

“Well, I can’t argue with you there.”

Tommy laughed, *really* laughed. It almost felt like whiplash for Wilbur, if whiplash was a fluttering heart mixing with startled excitement before quietly chuckling at the silliness of their back-and-forth trash talk.

After he finished, Tommy looked back at Wilbur, this time in the eyes, and they met a stalemate once again. Wilbur saw that conflicted look cross over his brother’s face again, and instead of letting another silence fall over the group, Wilbur took the liberty to say what he’s been dying to say since his epiphany in the Afterlife.

“Tommy, Fundy,” Wilbur began, doing his best to speak loud enough despite his voice demanding he whisper. “I’m sorry. For everything. I... I was dumb and misguided by my own selfish ideas, and I should’ve never subjected you guys or Tubbo or anyone else to my pain the way I did. I’m sorry for leaving you guys behind like that, and for freaking out the minute I saw either of you, and also for being a shit guardian when you guys needed me, and for everything that’s happened to you guys during my absence, and I know saying all of this isn’t going to fix everything and you guys are not in any way obligated to forgive me for the things I’ve done-.”

Wilbur was cut off by the squeezing feeling of Tommy, who had walked over and dropped to his knees, hugging Wilbur tightly. It took Wilbur a few seconds before he returned it, ignoring the few stray tears that fell down his face as he rubbed Tommy’s back comfortingly.

Eventually, Fundy had wiggled his way into the hug, and Wilbur couldn’t help but feel light with happiness. It felt as if all of his anger, his worries and his grudges had wandered away, leaving him feeling whole and complete with almost his whole family in his arms. If Tubbo was here, Wilbur probably could’ve died (again) content. He hoped Schlatt was having as great luck as he was.

“Let’s not give Wilbur anymore heart attacks, ok kids?” He whispered amusedly, though in his mind he was completely serious. He might just lose a life via how much he frets about his kids, and he’s been back for only a solid day.

“Fuck off, I’ll be the end of your miserable existence whether you like it or not,” Tommy grumbled.

“I second that statement,” Fundy added on.

Wilbur just rolled his eyes, sighing with a smile.

“Poetic as always, glad it runs in the family.”

####

Oh god, Tubbo had really done it this time.

He covered his mouth as soon as the statement had left his mouth, staring wide-eyed at the ground as he mulled over his own boldness. Surely, that had been enough? Schlatt must be at least a little annoyed by now?

His suspicions only grew when Schlatt spoke, tone flat but had something beneath it Tubbo couldn't quite place.

"Keep going. I know you want to."

Was this a trick? What game was Schlatt playing at? Should Tubbo go along with what he suggested?

Everything in him told him not to, that it was some twisted way for Schlatt to make fun of Tubbo or blame him for L'Manberg's fall. But then there was that small but growing part of him that wanted *so badly* to lay into Schlatt just how much of a terrible person he was. It would feel so cathartic. Tubbo had always had things he wanted to tell Schlatt, and now that was being given the opportunity to? Tubbo didn't even realize he had moved his hands away from his mouth, already beginning to go off unwittingly.

"Y-You raised taxes on Niki's bakery and she didn't deserve that, she's a lovely person. You always sucked the happiness and positivity out of everything, a-and you treated everyone around you like crap even when we tried to be nice to you."

"Keep it coming," Schlatt egged him on, which only fueled Tubbo's rants.

"You n-never took anything seriously unless it threatened your power, and you always lashed out at the cabinet for random things because you were always drunk. You ruined the White House and you ruined L'Manberg and you nearly cost my friendship with Tommy and you're a bad guy, a villain! You were the reason Wilbur went insane, and I-I wish we never met you when we were younger because none of this would've happened if you had just stayed out of our business!"

"Yeah, what else?"

"You're a prick, and think you know everything, and act all high and mighty, but in reality you're just a sad drunk that no one took seriously unless you had a sword to their throat or money in your hand! You're not intimidating, you're pitiful! You're pitiful, and you're mean and cruel and stupid and I hate you! *I hate you! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!*"

Tubbo took a few deep breaths, gulping down his fear and staring Schlatt directly in the eyes. He was taken aback by the reassuring look the ram gave him, but that only fueled his frustrated confliction even more, Tubbo glaring at him with as much loathing as he could muster. Because

that's what Tubbo felt, what he was supposed to feel at least: he had to hate Schlatt, and he did. Right?

"Stop giving me that look! Stop it! You can't just show up and act gentle with my son, and then not talk over anyone or stop me from talking, and then now you're letting me freely degrade you, and you're not even somewhat angry! Why aren't you mad, huh? Get mad, yell at me, tell me I'm stupid or threaten me or *something*! You have fair grounds here, so why aren't you taking the opportunity?!"

Schlatt gave Tubbo another moment just in case he had anything to add before speaking himself, this time in a quieter voice. "Do you wanna know the no bullshit answer?"

"Yes! Indulge me!" Tubbo growled, ready to finally hear an insult or Schlatt's master plan on how he was using everything he said and would turn it against him. Something super-villainy, something Tubbo could assure himself that he wasn't silently hoping that Schlatt had changed, that maybe the quiet cabinet days when Schlatt was sober and gave Tubbo awkwardly helpful advice, or the caravan days when he would bring Tubbo and Tommy (and eventually Fundy) gifts, that those good times could maybe be salvaged. He didn't want false hope, especially with relationships, and that's why Tubbo wanted Schlatt to stop being so *considerate*.

"You're not gonna like it, Tubbo."

"I don't care, just *tell* me!"

There was a pause, and Schlatt seemed to mull over his next few words. When he spoke, however, it truly shattered whatever hope Tubbo had of Schlatt still containing a bad bone in his body.

"You have a lot of pent up emotions, and I regret everything I did. And since I know that apologies mean basically nothing against my past actions that I can't take back, you deserve to at least get everything you never got to say to my face off your chest, without fear of a consequence."

Tubbo stared at Schlatt, dumbfounded and almost... relieved? It did feel good to at least get the majority off of his chest, and even if it wasn't everything, it was in fact therapeutic. Now, he felt just a smidge lighter, a weight lifted from his shoulders that he didn't even know had existed.

The ram continued unprompted, as if knowing Tubbo wouldn't have anything to say to that confession. "I am sorry, Tubbo. It's not worth anything unless you think it matters, but I do genuinely regret the things I did. If I could go back and, I dunno, assassinate myself I guess, I would. You didn't deserve the way I treated you, neither did Wilbur or Tommy or Fundy or Quackity, and I certainly didn't deserve to take over your guys' home you all fought so hard for. If you want me to leave and never speak to you or anyone on this SMP ever again, I'll do that. I understand if having me around isn't the best thing for you, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to stick around and try to make it up to you and everyone else. It's your decision, and I won't have any complaints for whatever you choose."

Now, Tubbo had an internal conflict:

On one hand, Schlatt apologized. While he was correct that it wasn't equal to the things he had done, he was genuine. He was giving Tubbo the option to let him stay or make him leave, something Schlatt had never suggested because it was always him in charge of himself and himself only. Maybe Schlatt had changed. Maybe, just maybe, they could try to be friends, and maybe they could have something close to what they all had during the caravan days. Tubbo was a realist in every other sense; he knew how long the road was going to be if they ever wanted to get to that point. There would be a lot of talking involved, a lot of forgiveness to be given and old habits to be broken, and even then it probably wouldn't feel the exact same as it had. But, it felt worth it, in theory.

On the other hand, this could still be Schlatt being a manipulative bastard. Tubbo still refused to put full faith into Schlatt until he could prove himself, and then maybe he could have a little bit of his trust regained, but that would be a while until that was achieved. And that still depended on Schlatt not using Tubbo as a Trojan horse to weasel his way back into a position of power.

Something kept nagging Tubbo to take the risk. After all, it's not like it would be all that hard to kill him if things went south. Schlatt had nothing but the clothes on his back, and he was sure Sam would be very strict about the ram having access to weapons and armor. It would be nice to have an extra pair of hands around to help around town.

And so, despite the odds that Tubbo had stacked against the ram, despite his still unresolved issues and the long road that laid ahead for the moobloom: he showed Schlatt to Jack Manifold's unused house.

####

Tubbo peeked his head up out of the trapdoor that led into Michael's room, careful not to let too much light into the dark room the piglin snored in as he pulled himself into the room. Quietly, he closed the trapdoor and made his way into a recliner he and Ranboo had put in so they could read to Michael when he wanted them to.

It had also become Tubbo's new sleeping spot whenever Ranboo wasn't home, Tubbo still unable to sleep alone without feeling like something was going to jump out and grab his feet. It was an irrational fear, one that he was still embarrassed to have at 17 years old, but he didn't know how other people did it. He had always slept in the same room as someone else; the bunk beds in Phil's house and the caravan, the room he shared with Fundy in the White House, the house he made for him and Tommy in new L'Manberg, and now in SnowChester, where he and Ranboo would sleep in separate beds that were a couple feet apart, like those old sitcoms with the married couples. He was just... Never alone. When Tommy had been exiled, he didn't get more than 4 hours of sleep a night, which he never told anyone because again, it was embarrassing.

Reaching for a blanket he knew that always laid behind the recliner, he pulled the soft fabric over himself and curled up in the chair, throwing his hat into the dark corners of the room. He hadn't bothered changing, too exhausted by the day's strange, turbulent turn of events.

He still had no idea how to feel anymore. He was angry, and then now he was... Tubbo didn't

even know. Schlatt knows everything that's happened since he died, so that meant Wilbur knew just as much. And god, he hadn't even thought about how he was going to approach Wilbur. It was too confusing, too emotionally-driven to think about this late, and therefore it was a problem future Tubbo would have the pleasure of figuring out.

Before he fell asleep completely, he felt someone climb into the recliner, maneuvering themselves so that Tubbo was forced to share his blanket and snuggle. Not that Tubbo could ever deny the content squeals and soon followed snores of Michael, who always seemed to wake up just to snuggle with whichever dad appeared in his room, who was more often than not Tubbo. Michael was hugging something soft, and if Tubbo was correct, Michael must've rifled through his old crate of past things and grabbed the old bee plushie he had clung to as a little kid. Again, a problem for future Tubbo to handle.

There were the distinct sounds of soft clucking, and Tubbo felt the top of the recliner move before it stilled, Michael's pet chicken roosting right above them. They were quite an odd bunch, but it was Tubbo's solace in his complicated life. SnowChester, and the family he had created here, it was the one thing Tubbo hadn't fucked up. And he didn't plan to anytime soon, nor would he let anyone or anything do it for him.

He hoped he made the right decision in letting Schlatt stay as he drifted off into sleep, dreaming about the warm sunlight and the bees that danced across the forest just beyond the old caravan.

Chapter End Notes

mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm yeah this took me three weeks to write :,) and i finished it at 6 in the morning

hope you enjoyed, stay hydrated and i'll see you in the next installment <3

Still Heart, Bleeding Heart

Chapter Notes

edit 4/2/2021: mmmm hoghunt by SAD-ist, say thank you to SAD-ist everyone because now we are getting techno pov sometime in the future

this took me three weeks because i kept changing chapter ideas and have honestly reworked it so that now, it will lead to quite an interesting chapter 6, which will take me a bit due to my end year exams, so please bear with me and do read the end notes on this one because i have a few special announcements :3

somehow y'all make the funniest goddamn bookmarks, please keep making me laugh with them

420 lol. also another 12,000 word chapter because i quite literally do not know the meaning of 'condense'

!!!!!!HEAVY TW THIS CHAPTER BECAUSE I AM PAIN INCARNATE AND I CANT SUFFER ALONE!!!!!!

referenced suicide, implied self-harm, negative thoughts, implied character death, mentions of past abuse, use of unhealthy coping mechanisms, in general heavy angst (there's the fluffy moments there too) but there is no gore or anything, still be careful and in the right mindset please :33

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur was certain that Fundy and Tommy were going to maul Puffy the moment she said Wilbur had to go with her, their protests loud and grips around their relative protective.

Not that Wilbur was inclined to quiet their fierce railing, only mustering an apologetic look to the enderman teen that stood by Puffy's side, who looked horribly out of place and uncomfortable. He didn't want Fundy or Tommy leaving his sights quite yet. There was still so much to talk about, and so much lost time between their dysfunctional family that he desperately yearned to reel back in before the looming tsunami of angst washed away the moderate bliss he had with them. Hell, he had still yet to reunite with Tubbo, but he hoped the moobloom wouldn't feel too terribly left out before Wilbur could see him once more.

It took only a few minutes before Puffy finally conceded beneath their stubborn arguing, opting to compromise and inviting them to her home for the night. Wilbur calmly agreed, which also quieted the tension between the group as he rose to his feet, Fundy and Tommy following suit with him. He didn't mind the way Tommy refused to let go of Wilbur's left arm, or how Fundy had snaked his way beneath Wil's other arm, contently resting along the fox's shoulders. Honestly, he was buzzing with the contact he had desperately missed while dead, so as they walked in a clunky huddle that was far more trouble than walking side-by-side would be, he didn't complain when his toes or heels were stepped on.

Puffy's house turned out to be not too far from the hotel, and it was quite the beauty if Wilbur had any say. A pebbled path led through a lovely and well-kept garden and to a set of mahogany-wood doors, which were embedded into the trunk of the biggest mushroom Wilbur has ever seen. The beige mycelium beneath the red cap was decorated with strung lights, and the pearly-white stem had lush vines and moss that bloomed with flowers at every other spot. There were no windows that Wilbur could make out immediately, though he was quite fine with the privacy the fungal house would provide for the night.

Ranboo, the teenage enderman that Wilbur had given his sympathy for his loud family, excused himself before they entered the home, saying he had to start making his way to SnowChester. The town name made Wilbur perk up, though he steeled himself from asking for his love to be sent Tubbo's way. As much as he wanted to assure the moobloom he hadn't forgotten about him, that he would wrap him up in just as big of a hug as he had given Fundy and Tommy, that he was deeply regretful for the way he treated the boy and would swear up and down and sideways to protect and care for him as he would Fundy and Tommy for the rest of his remaining days; he couldn't. Letting Ranboo know that he knew that Tubbo lived there meant he knew things he shouldn't, and at the current moment, adding the idea that Wilbur was very much up to date with his family's problems and the SMP's transgressions against them was more sour than sweet in his mind.

Seeing Tommy fall from a building and Fundy nearly explode himself was enough stress for Wilbur's day. He just wanted to exist comfortably in the presence of his family for a few hours without further worry. Possibly even sleep, as his muscles screamed at him with fatigue and dull burning from the impromptu exercising the Brit had performed throughout the day. And most definitely change his clothes, hating yet understanding the way everyone would stare at the articles of clothing. They were reminders of a different time, a different *Wilbur* for that matter, and he wanted nothing to do with *that* past any more than the next sane person would.

The enderman departed without much more conversation, getting a few well-wishing goodbyes from Fundy and Puffy, a friendly smile from Wilbur, and a muttered, albeit harmless insult from Tommy. Wilbur was tempted to apologize for his brother, but when he saw the playful grin on the blonde's face and the reciprocated expression from Ranboo, he let it go.

Walking through the doors of the mushroom house, Wilbur was met with the cozy den of a cottage-esque interior. The floor was a rich cedar oak, with the creme-colored walls rising to what Wilbur could only assume to be the bottom of the cap and decorated with framed pictures and posters at all heights. A ladder laid directly ahead of the group, leading up into the cap and into what Wilbur could assume to be the sheep-hybrid's room. A plum-colored couch with a rainbow croqueted blanket hung neatly over the cushions to his right, facing an identical couch decorated with white throw pillows with a coffee table separating the two couches, a few books and neglected mugs littered across the table's surface. A little further on the left side of the home was an open kitchen, furnaces stacked three high next to a fridge covered in children's drawings, pictures, and corny magnets that screamed the mom-energy Wilbur knew Puffy had. There were quite a few brightly colored sticky notes dotted across the fridge, but Wilbur was too far to read them. Cooking utensils were hung on a silver rack above the sink, which was connected to spacious granite counters that extended a good few feet. There was a dining table not too far from the counters, the chairs and table made of the same cedar that made up the floor. Each chair had comfortable, purple-plaid padding on the seat, with the table adorning a similarly patterned cloth. Lanterns hung from the ceiling by sturdy chains, illuminating the cozy house with a warm, inviting feeling that soothed Wilbur's unconscious worry.

It was a simplistic house, but it was most definitely *leagues* better than what Sam might've had in mind.

Puffy led them inside and urged them to make themselves comfortable, to which Wilbur was walked over to the nearby couch and sat down with Fundy and Tommy, who still refused to leave his side. He still didn't care all too much, the feather-soft cushions giving his aching body reprieve and threatening to make him fall asleep right there as he sunk into it.

As Wilbur leaned his head on the back of the couch and let his eyes close, he let out a silent yawn, another wave of tension leaving his body as he casually listened to the sound of a fridge being opened, followed by a few wooden cupboards and then the sound of a running sink.

Fundy shifted slightly before slipping out from beneath Wilbur's arm, Wilbur opening one eye to see his son walking out of sight and towards the sounds of the kitchen. Once he heard quiet conversation being made he closed his eye again, lifting his arm to rest along the back of the couch for when the fox returned. Tommy also shifted, but instead of leaving the couch, he curled into Wilbur's side, head resting in his lap while the blonde's fingers fiddled with the bottom of Wilbur's trench coat. Wilbur said nothing but did let his hand rest on Tommy's head, gently carding his fingers through the unruly strands of hair and careful to avoid knots.

The hum of quiet voices and the domestic sounds of the kitchen were enough to create white noise in Wilbur's head, and before he knew it, he had slipped into sleep, lulled by the silent melodies of a safe and homely reassurance.

####

He wasn't sure what time it was when he woke up next, but he was brought from his rest by the soft tapping on his face. His eyes opened to a much more dimly lit house, the lanterns having been put out and only a few lit candles scattered about giving the house any sort of light.

Wilbur was still in the same position he had fallen asleep in, though now covered with a blanket and with two empty spaces beside him, making him sit upright the moment he realized and nearly smacking his face into the hand that had been tapping his face. He almost began to look around frantically before his eyes settled on the couch in front of him, both Fundy and Tommy sleeping soundly and stacked on top of each other. Fundy comfortably snuggled Tommy, who used his nephew's chest as a pillow while his feet dangled off the arm of the couch. A blanket was dutifully tucked around them, and as if to further assure Wilbur that they were fine, both of them quietly snored.

"They fell asleep about an hour after you did," Puffy said from behind him, causing Wilbur to angle himself so he could face her. She was still wearing the same clothes, though she looked considerably more tired underneath the harsh shadows of the glass-encased candle she held. "They wanted to wake you up for tea, but I advised them to leave you be. You looked pretty tired, and they agreed that they didn't want to disturb you."

“I would’ve been fine, but thank you for the consideration, Miss Puffy,” Wilbur thanked hoarsely, glancing over at Fundy and Tommy again to ignore the sting in his throat. He was surprised he could speak at all.

“Puffy is alright. How about you come sit at the table for a few minutes? You have a couple of cuts on your head that need some TLC,” Wilbur turned just in time to see her gesture to the table, which had a candelabra in the center and two mugs on top of coasters, with two chairs already pulled out and pleading to be sat in. “I made some more tea, it’ll help with your throat.”

Nodding, Wilbur threw the blanket off of him and laid it on the couch, quietly leaving the den area to meet with Puffy, who was already sitting down and sipping on her tea. Once he sat himself down in the metal chair, she bent down and reached for something beneath the table, pulling out a white case from the shadows and setting it in her lap. Opening it, Wilbur could see the essentials of a first-aid kit: gauze, band-aids, burn cream, medical wrap. He could probably recite everything within the box and not miss one item, and he wasn’t sure if that could be considered good or bad.

He took his mug and drank from it while Puffy rifled through the box, the sweet flavor tasting like pure heaven and the warm temperature soothing his throat in an instant. He couldn’t help but gulp down the liquid, the taste just too good to slowly sip on. Once he set the mug back down on the coaster and wiped at his mouth, his eyes found the pleasing smile of Puffy, who held a package of antiseptic wipes in one hand and a box of band-aids in the other.

“I guess I’ll have to pour you some more after this,” She giggled lightly, setting the box of band-aids on the table before opening the wipes, pulling one from the plastic packaging, and carefully lifting it to Wilbur’s face.

“This might sting,” Was all she said before she began to gingerly clean what had to be small but deep cuts, Wilbur wincing as his eyes watered. For the next few minutes it was silent, Puffy diligently cleaning and bandaging the cuts on Wilbur’s forehead and Wilbur focusing on anything other than the burn of antiseptic. In total, he got several band-aids applied to his forehead, and he thanked Puffy quietly when she wiped away some dried blood that had been leftover on his face and hands.

While she packed away the wipes and band-aids, she said something that came out of complete left-field, leaving Wilbur completely speechless and wide-eyed as she switched the first-aid box for her and Wilbur’s mugs, standing to refill them.

“You know what happened with Tommy in Logstedshire.”

His first instinct was to deny it.

“What’s a Logstedshire?” His own voice, as raspy and dry as it was, betrayed his words, his tone too forced with questioning and rising just a little too high for it not to be noticed. Really, though, it was the amount of time it took him to respond, his words only slipping from his mouth just as Puffy came back to sit, setting Wilbur’s mug on his coaster.

“You’re not a very good liar,” She sat back down, meeting Wilbur’s displeased eyes as she set her own mug on her coaster. Her voice became very matter-of-factly, leaving no room for sugar-

coating or the gentle cadence she used. “If you don’t want to talk about it until you discuss it with him, that’s your choice. What I need to know is how *much* you know, Wilbur. In general, not just his exile. How present were you during the past few months.”

It took Wilbur a while before he answered, opting to drink about half of his tea while he wrestled with his thoughts to form an adequate explanation.

It should’ve been a simple explanation, but it couldn’t be. Not with the images of Fundy breaking down late into the night, or Tommy being roughed up by Dream, or Tubbo willingly giving his life in exchange for two meaningless items constantly popping back up in his thoughts, clouding his thought process and eroding his well-spent composure. He would routinely look over to Fundy and Tommy, who still laid asleep on the couch, but he had to remind himself that they were fine.

Even though they aren’t, the nagging voice in his head roared. It wasn’t wrong; they were all sorts of fucked up, and it was Wilbur’s fault for letting it happen and for causing it. He got to see it firsthand, and he too had to live with the memories of fire and ash and explosions that seemingly followed his family everywhere they turned. He had to tell them eventually, and there was no doubt in his mind that it would go over terribly, because no one liked to talk about their problems or trauma or the memories that haunt them, especially after learning their dead relative was watching in silent agony, just within arm’s reach yet unable to communicate.

No one wants to disrupt the happy atmosphere that had surrounded the trio, even though it would inevitably turn sour with bitter nostalgia, and the unforgettable memories that already made everyone keep themselves at an arm-length’s distance would slowly drive them apart, and then his family would be disjointed once again. He had seen the way Tubbo and Tommy had become stiff around each other before Dream’s bunker, and the way Fundy was still untrusted between both of them. He observed the way Tommy still flinched at quick movements, or how Tubbo couldn’t handle loud noises, or how Fundy purposely avoided going outside of the confines of Eret’s castle for weeks. Wilbur knew they hated being asked about it, or having it pointed out: which only made Wilbur all the more nerve-wracked.

Tommy would deflect with anger and dilute his stories heavily so that they seemed not all that bad, refusing to accept the fact exile was much more horrific than he let on to others. Fundy would just laugh it off and change the subject, unwilling to face the uncomfortable memories that he tried to forget but couldn’t escape when he fell asleep. Tubbo would simply shrug and act like it didn’t bother him, even though Wilbur knew the moobloom was bottling his feelings, slowly becoming a ticking bomb with a hair-trigger detonator.

It only added salt to the wound that, despite their self-destructive efforts, Wilbur would still know everything, and that lying to him was a waste of time on their part.

Slowly, he found his voice again, taking in a deep breath before sighing, fiddling with his hands as he spoke softly, this time not meeting Puffy’s patient gaze.

“Everything,” He hadn’t meant for tears to begin welling up in his eyes as his gaze focused on the two sleeping on the couch, a bitter and tight-lipped smile growing on his face. “I know just about

everything.”

Puffy hummed, gently putting her hand on his shoulder and giving it a comforting squeeze. He knew she wasn't directly encouraging him to continue, but it felt like a mudslide had begun from his mouth, messy and unstoppable as he stumbled over his words as his gaze never left the two boys on the couch. Maybe it was because he was still tired and didn't realize how much he was sharing, or maybe it was that Wilbur simply couldn't contain it in anymore after months of having to be a bystander, but either way, Wilbur didn't stop once he started.

“I know my son was pawned off to someone else because his grand-father couldn't be bothered to handle him. That he had his heart toyed with and broken dozens of times, that he buried himself in work and inventions and betrayed his home one final time because he felt like no one wanted him there, not even his own family. He rarely sleeps because of nightmares, and anytime those happen he always wakes up with *my* name on his tongue. I know that everyone takes him for granted, I did too, and that it hurts him. No one is there for him when he needs it, and as much as he tries to make others happy, he's always brushed to the side in favor of someone else.

“I know that Tubbo handled the presidency the best he possibly could. That he was forced to exile Tommy, that he was pressured into hunting down Technoblade and imprisoning his father. That nothing he ever did as president was ever his decision, always manipulated or coerced into choosing the choice *they* wanted. I know he tried to kill himself for Tommy's discs, and was just as willing to give himself to Dream just for the pieces of plastic. I-I know he made SnowChester as a way to cope, and that his nuclear plans are the result of feeling like he could be under attack at any point and time.

“I know that Tommy was lashing out after my death. I know he was exiled. I saw him starved, and beaten, and berated by Dream, who had the audacity to make him feel isolated and hated and like everything would be better without him around, that the masked *bastard* was his only '*friend*.' I saw him contemplate killing h-himself, and I watched as he sided with his best-friend because he thought his friendship was worth more than some discs and a stupid piglin's anarchist ideals. I watched Technoblade slaughter them without remorse for a second time while our father *h-helped* , and then I saw Tommy grapple with the idea that someone from his close family would die in front of him, powerless to stop it for a *second* time.

“I know everything. And I-I wish I didn't, Puffy, it felt like hell to watch because I was an invisible force, silent and non-existent to reality, and I know that I-I invaded their privacy and that I-I had no right to follow them around, but I couldn't help myself because as much as I died in resentment, I love them and I-I couldn't just *leave* them, no matter how angry I felt. I really don't want to fuck anything up again, b-but they are so *hurt* that it's inevitable. I-I'm the one to blame for it, because I did half the damage by killing myself and leaving them to fend for themselves, and every day I wish I could take it back and realize how stupid I-I was. I wish I never pressed that d-damned button.

“I don't understand why they have just accepted me back like it was nothing; they should hate me, they should be yelling curses and wishing me dead again. They have every reason to hold me a-accountable, and I don't w-want them to feel like they have to forgive me b-because I'll love them u-unconditionally no m-matter what. I don't know what t-to do, or how I'm going t-to fix anything because I don't think it c-can be, and that's what terrifies me. I just want t-them to be happy again-.”

Wilbur didn't know when his scowl had become a quivering lip, or when his rambling had become quiet sobs, but he willingly accepted the tight hug Puffy pulled him into, trying his best not to get her nice shirt wet with the tears rolling down his face for what must've been the millionth time

today.

He didn't deserve her kindness; he didn't deserve much of what had happened today. He was forever thankful for it, but he knew the truth, or at least his personal truth. He knew what the gnawing, familiar guilt had started to build within his gut since that morning, because he had felt it at every moment he had watched his family break and fall apart, over and over again. He knew he was the reason, the catalyst of the disasters that had ruined his entire family for good, that caused Tubbo to take on a role he could never fully control, that caused Tommy to become a shell of his former self, that caused Fundy to feel as if he wasn't enough for anyone (all of which Wilbur knew of all too well). For his father to disown half of his brood, kill another, and cling to the last who Wilbur only saw as a cold-blooded killer. Everything wasn't perfect before his death, but it seemed like a downwards slope that never stopped when he was gone.

It hurt, and even though Wilbur thought he had accepted these very facts months prior, the fresh and thrumming reality that surrounded him made each realization feel like brand-new cuts dashing themselves across his scarred arms. It made the ugly depression in his chest ache with a yearning for easier times, for when Wilbur wasn't pouring out his plights onto a benevolent stranger in the dead of night, knowing that it would go unspoken about after they would depart for bed, and Wilbur would have to tackle his issues on his own until he felt ready to face the scars he left on his friends and family. He wished for when he had the caravan and his little make-shift family, nothing but them against the world, with bright smiles and warm skies and cozy game nights bringing them together. The times when Wilbur would forget why he had left home in the first place for days on end, too preoccupied with having the time of his life.

A time Wilbur had let slip away all too quickly, now faded memories in his mind and lost polaroids in an even more lost scrapbook, collecting dust somewhere or simply gone in an explosion or accident beyond his control.

He'd never have that back, and that's what drove the metaphorical knife deeper into Wilbur's bleeding heart.

Neither of them noticed the way Fundy's ears pressed against his head, nor the silent tears that slipped from his stiffly shut eyes, hugging a sleeping Tommy closer.

###

Tubbo really couldn't tell you what had happened over the past few days, because nothing of real importance had occurred.

The days crawled by slowly, almost mocking Tubbo and the tension that rifled itself through the small town overnight. They were only made bearable with Michael, who was ecstatic to have new people milling about, and also with the rising temperatures of an early spring. While Tubbo would busy himself with some menial chores about the town, he would routinely be dragged from his tasks to rescue whatever poor soul had Michael hanging off their side, the small piglin too curious and friendly for his own good. Though, for the most part, his son's infectious jovialness would put a proud grin on Tubbo's face, and one on whoever he was unintentionally disrupting.

He did feel uneasy about his son's innate fascination with Schlatt however, who he found more than often at the receiving end of his son's happy nature.

He wasn't quite sure if it was because of his dark vermillion horns, or the fact that Schlatt is fairly different than most the young piglin has seen yet, but what he did know was that if he couldn't find Michael in his room, or following Foolish around, or playing with his chicken outside, he was wherever the ram was that day.

Sometimes, it was easier. Michael could just be quietly watching Schlatt from a distance as he chopped up wood, or shoveled snow, or repaired loose shingles on roofs with Connor at his side and Sam watching diligently. Tubbo could just scoop up his son and offer him something more exciting to the five year old than watching chores idly, to which the piglin would squeal in delight and happily agree.

Most of the time, however, he would find the toddler running circles around the group as Sam desperately tried to coax him away, Connor giggling at the piglin's antics, and Schlatt still as stone, crouching himself down to the ground while Michael used him as a personal playground, grabbing his horns and ears and attempting to get Schlatt to follow him by tugging at his coat-sleeve persistently. The ram would be making casual conversation with him, Michael replying back in grunts and snorts, and despite the language barrier they seemed to have deep and thoughtful conversations.

“What's your opinion on the economy?”

“Ooo,” the babbled vowels were followed by a snort.

“Interesting take, I like your boldness. I would've never thought about those variables until now.”

Michael giggled.

“Oh, so now we're joking about serious economic disparities? You got one sick sense of humor, pal.”

Michael definitely understood zero of what Schlatt said, but it still made the piglin laugh even harder, which couldn't help but tug a soft grin onto Tubbo's face. He still became unnerved anytime he was around the ram, but at least it was made bearable with his son being so unwarrantedly happy.

Still, it was that naivete that made Tubbo prickly with nervousness. He didn't want Michael to lose

that innocence if he could do anything about it, so it was understandable that the sight of Schlatt just talking to him was enough to set off alarm sirens in his head. After all, it was *Schlatt*, and Tubbo never knew the ram to ever have a filter, even when Tubbo was fairly young and he still lived in the caravan-.

Those memories only caused something ugly to bubble up in Tubbo's stomach, and he pushed them away as quickly as they came to mind.

Other than his frequent trips to get Michael from Schlatt, Tubbo hadn't interacted with the ram at all since his nightly arrival, or with any of the adults really. He would drop off a list to Sam early in the morning with things that needed to be fixed or done around the compound, and then leave to make breakfast. That was pretty much the interaction Tubbo had that wasn't Michael induced, and it wasn't even direct. Not that it bothered Tubbo in the slightest, because it's not like Schlatt deserved his undivided attention, or that Sam or Connor were suddenly off the hook for bringing him back.

He considered the ram's laboring around the town as the start of his penance, and if he didn't like it, then he could rightly screw off to anywhere 100 miles away from SnowChester or the SMP. All it would do would prove Tubbo's point; Schlatt was still a piece of shit, and not worth the moobloom's time in trying to 'reconcile' with the ex-emperor.

Still, he'd have the occasional glance or nod to the ram whenever he passed. He still prided himself on making dinner every night and delivering it to the three men who bunkered down in Jack's unused house, and still politely accepted the gratitude, even if he didn't particularly believe it to be genuine. After all, they were doing stuff around SnowChester, and deserved at least a good meal in return (Tubbo would begrudgingly hash out a payment deal with Sam later, even though the creeper would most likely refuse it this time around). He had even entertained the idea of inviting them over for dinner one night, but he sabotaged the thought after dropping a cup and hearing the sound of glass shattering, his mind pulling itself back into a memory of a beer bottle narrowly missing his head and breaking against the wall of the White House behind him.

For the most part, Tubbo was coping. The nightmares that he frequently found himself waking from were nothing new, and the addition of the ram within them wasn't surprising, so he paid them no mind despite the growing dark circles beneath his eyes. He brushed aside his violent flinching whenever Michael squealed too loud, or the queasy feeling he got when he passed by the dusty crossbow that hung above the fireplace's mantle, right beside the shiny netherite sword and beaten shield. He tried to shrug away his anxiety when he was in a closed space, or the irrational fear that the walls were going to box him in at any moment, because he should know that they weren't, because that's not how walls worked.

He had Michael, he reminded himself as he shut his eyes one night and steadied his quick breathing, the darkness that surrounded him and his sleeping son feeling a little too enveloping.

He had Michael, he reminded himself as the sun rose on the third day of avoiding his night terrors, many which ended with a colorful blast followed by searing phantom pain across his long healed burns, reminding Tubbo to look at himself in the mirror in the morning and remember that he was a failure, through and through.

He had Michael, he continued to remind himself when he came across the old bee plushie from his childhood nestled in the piglin's bed, debating whether to burn it or hug it close as bittersweet

memories dredged themselves from the deepest chasms of Tubbo's mind, a place and a person and a family Tubbo didn't want to be reminded of.

Tubbo was coping for his sake.

And due to this fact, everything went to shit after about a week.

####

Tubbo had gone about four days without proper sleep, which was his first mistake. He got little doses here and there, but as soon as it began to slip into anything other than resting his eyes, he promptly woke himself up and went about doing something. His second mistake was drinking an unhealthy amount of caffeine, elevating his sense of energy along with his heart rate. With an elevated heart rate came the negative side effects, such as emotions being amplified by double the amount they usually would. And given the already terrible sleep schedule, the paranoia, and the resolute decision to stay strong for Michael; nothing was shaped for a successful day in the slightest.

It took until seven o'clock in the evening until he finally snapped (which, in hindsight, was much longer than expected).

He had been inside sitting on his sofa in front of the fireplace, dozing off periodically as Michael pittered around with some legos, when there was a sharp knock on his front door. The knock was deafening in his quiet home, and the sheer surprise of it was enough to make Tubbo wide-awake, suddenly aware of every noise and movement the house, Michael, and himself made. In the corners of his eyes, he thought he saw bright colors flash, but when he turned to meet them, all he saw was the empty space behind the couch, a hatch leading to the basement covered poorly by a thick deerskin rug.

He tried to collect himself as he approached the front door, shaking his hands off to hopefully rid the way they trembled before opening the door carefully, but surprisingly enough, it was Sam standing there. He was holding Ranboo's forearm as the enderman-hybrid stood idly there, blankly staring ahead as a purple glaze coated his eyes. He had on his usual suit and tie get-up, a poor choice for the snow, and that was apparent enough when Tubbo noticed the way his fingertips and points of his ears and lips were beginning to turn a sickly blue color.

Tubbo didn't really process what Sam had said next. Something about being confused or worried about the enderman, but Tubbo waved him inside wordlessly and turned on his heel, walking away to the kitchen to retrieve what he needed.

The doors and ceilings of Tubbo's home had been modified for his platonic husband's convenience, rising to a firm eight feet, so the enderman walked in with no issue as he was led by Sam, who only looked at Ranboo with increasing concern. Tubbo didn't pay the two much

attention as he rifled through his cupboards, his mind only focused on one task and brushing aside the panic when he had to reach deeper inside a cupboard.

If he tried to realize the fact that his front door was still open, or how the cold wind threatened to put out the warm fire as it blew in, or how the light in the kitchen kept flickering because it still hadn't been fixed, Tubbo might explode from content overflow.

It took Tubbo a little longer than usual to find the thing he needed, his object permanence less than ideal in his sleep-deprived state. Once he did, he didn't bother explaining himself before he turned around:

Promptly spraying Ranboo in the face with a bright pink misting bottle.

Barely five seconds passed before the purple sheen that coated the enderman's eyes disappeared, his lifeless expression quickly turning to one of discomfort. Ranboo tore his arm from a stumped-faced Sam's grasp, rubbing at his face and groaning while Tubbo set the bottle on the counter, now focused on getting a paper towel so the enderman wouldn't keep rubbing in the diluted awkward potion.

Tubbo had been prone to witnessing Ranboo's 'enderwalking' quite a few times, but it was only after they platonically married that Ranboo had told Tubbo about them in-depth. They were essentially why he had gaps in his memory, or tended to wake up places he didn't remember being before. They seemed to occur randomly, and Ranboo worried about what he did within them because he was, in a simple sense, asleep and not in control of his body.

So, as a solution they both agreed on, Tubbo promised to spray his platonic soulmate with his number one enemy anytime he came across him in such a state. Or, at least an awkward potion *diluted* with his number one enemy, which they discovered was enough to cause discomfort and jolt him from the unconsciousness, but not enough to really harm him. Like a splash of cold water, except it's not lethal and also wouldn't cover him in acidic burns.

Tubbo found a dry dish cloth in service of a paper towel, snatching it from its place on the counter and making his way to his tall friend, forcing his hands from his face before shoving the cloth in his hands. He didn't look up to him, but he heard the mumbled, "Thank you, Tubbo" before the cloth was over Ranboo's face, the enderman trying his best to gently wipe at his face.

Sam seemed to struggle with words, eyes darting between the teenagers as his mouth hung open in clear puzzlement. Tubbo didn't want to bother with waiting for the obvious string of questions flailing around in the older man's head, so he did his best to answer the creeper unprompted.

"He has a sleep-walking condition, or something. The spray bottle is a diluted awkward-potion, it's to wake him up without giving him acid burns. It's a mutual agreement," He stated flatly, leaning on his counter a little too heavily, struggling to keep his head upright and make eye-contact with Sam.

The creeper-hybrid simply looked more confused, but there was a gleam of scrutiny in his eyes as he took a long look at Tubbo, something the moobloom didn't quite appreciate or need at the moment as he looked away, now very interested in the corner of the kitchen. Sam's attention was only drawn away when the front door banged on the wall as a gust of wind blew harshly on it, shaking the doorframe and causing Tubbo to cut off a surprised yelp, ignoring the way his body

jolted as if shot with something.

“I’ll go close the door, stay right here, boys,” Sam said before he reluctantly left them both in the kitchen, Tubbo looking as if he would collapse at any moment and Ranboo wiping the last of the stinging potion from his face. Sam’s eyes didn’t leave Tubbo until he was out of the kitchen, and the moobloom was sure that when he would come back that it would be the same old questions he asked anytime he visited:

“Have you been sleeping?”

“Do you need help with Michael?”

“Would you like me to see if Puffy’s available?”

“Do you need a hug?”

For all but the first, Tubbo always answered no.

He knew his limits. He was beginning to reach them, sure, but it wasn’t going to boil over. It never did, and there was no reason that it would tonight. Ranboo was finally back after his few weeks absence, and he made everything twice as easy around SnowChester. Tubbo would have a best friend to keep him somewhat sane, and his stress could start to unwind with the weight he held on his shoulders. He could have someone to banter with again, laughter or conversation to fill the heavy silence that would plague the moobloom when Michael wasn’t near. The parenting finally gets divided once more, and Tubbo would have at least a few minutes for himself after chores, and tasks at the nuclear plant, and making dinner (before Ranboo could infect it with god-awful pasta noodles).

A few minutes to *truly* recuperate. To process this hellish week that has taken more than he had to give. Just a few minutes to coexist with his complicated feelings that made him want to punch walls and sob infinitely at the same time.

Maybe he’d go see Tommy tomorrow or the day after, and then he could hopefully reset his degraded week. He and Tommy could talk about this sort of stuff easier because they could explain it in their own ways and still be understood, even if it was highly unconventional and avoided much of the darker details that they both refused to let the other know about. Ranboo, as much as Tubbo loved his conversations he had and time spent with him, was like Sam and Puffy. He wanted to *fix* him.

He gave Tubbo repeated solutions to problems that never solved or helped anything. They were the same well-meaning suggestions Puffy and Sam would give him, the same ones Quackity and

Fundy gave him during the presidency, the same ones whispered to him by Tommy when Manberg and PogTopia all became too much for the both of them; at least, before they both realized trusting the advice of anyone other than themselves was a waste of time.

Tubbo just wanted someone to listen for once, and so did Tommy. So, they were each other's walking diaries, never once uttering the things they told the other, and never daring to press further if the topic was suddenly changed. They would hug and comfort each other when needed, but never did they utter the empty, soulless words of guidance that had been shoved down their throats since the first war. It would feel hypocritical if they did so.

Tommy would probably try to fight Tubbo's night terrors, though. He'd insist he stay with him until he got a full night's rest without disruption, and Tubbo wouldn't put up much fight before he was dead-weight on Tommy's bed, completely unresponsive for the next however many hours. Then, Tommy would walk him back to SnowChester eventually, they'd screw around with Ranboo and Michael for a bit, and then they'd depart with a promise to visit soon. That's how it went when weeks like these happened, and each time it worked like a charm.

Except, this week was nothing like the bad weeks Tubbo had in the past. It was a completely new kind of stress, a completely unearthed part of himself Tubbo had forced into frozen dormancy a long time ago. And while his trauma thawed itself and surfaced for air, while Schlatt walked around his town like he wasn't dead just a few days ago, while Wilbur was somewhere else in the SMP with Tommy and Fundy, all Tubbo could do was convince himself that this was just another bad week.

Tubbo didn't need Sam or Puffy or Ranboo to fix his problems, because it's not like adults (Ranboo doesn't apply to the next statement, Tubbo told himself) ever did any good for him anyways. He was mature enough and he could handle it. He didn't fight in wars where he was treated like an adult, or held accountable for the faults of a teenage president, or receive the scars of a martyr just to be treated like a child the moment he had a bad week.

No one bothered to stop and ask him how he felt then, so why should they now?

He had been in far worse situations. A week like this should be nothing compared to the Festival where he had been blown to bits by his estranged piglin brother, or the 17th when he woke up from a coma to learn Wilbur had killed himself with his father's help, or the 23rd when he stumbled into the charred remains of Logstedshire with no Tommy in sight, and the tower that touched the clouds mocked him for his neglect.

Tubbo just needed to steel himself for a few more hours, and then he'd try to sleep, or he'd go find Tommy, wherever he might be. He'd probably want to talk to Tubbo, too. If he was indeed with Wilbur (who Tubbo couldn't tell if he actually wanted to meet again so soon, especially given Wilbur's coldness towards him and the Festival incident before he died. He was definitely more keen to make amends with his older brother than he was with Schlatt, but it was still made complicated given their strained relationship after the Election), Tommy would definitely make time for them to talk, as this entire situation has most definitely turned their worlds on their heads and they probably had a lot of shared feelings about it. Maybe even Fundy could join them for once. The bottom line, however, the two always made it work, no matter how inconvenient it might've been, because they never knew when it could be their last time seeing the other alive.

He could make it one more night.

####

“Hey, Tubbo?” Ranboo called down from the hatch leading up to the second floor.

Tubbo had just closed the door while Sam carefully walked down the stairs of the house’s porch, the wind harshly blowing some snowflakes into Tubbo’s face before the door made the soft click and was shut to the cruel elements. The house was an eerie quiet and didn’t help his already high-strung nerves as he rubbed at his eyes, trying to rid the spots that kept invading his vision like burning film.

“Yeah, Boo, what’s up?”

“Is Michael down there?”

####

Schlatt had to admit, the kid had determination.

Schlatt had been asleep on the couch when he felt someone tug at his blanket, the pull weak but enough to make the ram crack an eyelid open. “Connor, go find your own fuuh- uuuny joke, hey kid?”

Schlatt was startled awake by the toddler standing beside the couch, hands greedily tugging at his blanket before realizing he had been caught. A bashful look came over the piglin, who looked away from Schlatt and removed his hands, instead using them to cover his eyes. It was cute, and Schlatt’s half-groggy state took full advantage of the ram’s soft side.

“Micha, I can still see ya,” Schlatt chuckled, lifting a hand from out beneath the blanket to ruffle the small pink fuzz on top of his head gently, the piglin child peeking his brown eye from behind his fingers to look at Schlatt. He was quickly drawn to the fact that the kid was freezing, then noticing that he was only wearing a caramel jumper, a pair of race-car pajama pants and snow-covered slippers, and that’s when his grogginess left him for a much more needed wake-up call.

He sat up as quickly as he could, tossing his blanket off of him and wrapping it around the toddler, concern settling itself somewhere in the back of Schlatt’s mind while he did his best to try and get Michael warm.

“Jesus, kid, you aren’t even wearing boots! What were you even doing outside?” He asked while he picked him up and put him on the couch, receiving no response other than a shocked snort at

getting whisked up from the floor. The piglin did nestle himself into the thick wool of the blanket, appreciating the new warmth and not even second-glancing as Schlatt made his way over to an unlit fireplace, rummaging through a bin before finding a flint and steel. He swiped it a few times before it sparked, the fresh wood catching flame and beginning to already warm the cold living room.

He barely noticed the soft footfalls of someone coming out of a room along the Living room's back wall, nor the yawn that escaped their lips before they spoke, nearly sending Schlatt into the fire with surprise. "What the hell are you doing up, Schlatt?"

"Connor! Don't curse right now," He hissed, turning to face him over his shoulder. His friend was wrapped in a fluffy blue robe, dark hair fussed from sleep and eyelids still drooping from leftover tiredness. He was a light sleeper, so Schlatt wasn't surprised if he had been too loud and woke up the man.

Connor couldn't see Michael from where he stood behind the couch, but the playful smirk that dawned on his face was enough to send Schlatt scrambling to the toddler, cupping his hands over his ears before:

"Damn Schlatt, I didn't fucking know you hated cursing now. Shit, if only you told me sooner-."

"Connor, I have about fifteen reasons to kick your ah- butt right now, but for his sake, shut up."

Connor's eyebrows furrowed in confusion, approaching the couch and looking over before his eyes widened, slapping a hand over his mouth like he was cutting himself off from a curse.

Schlatt knew the feeling.

"How did he get here?" He asked in a loud whisper, Schlatt removing his hands from the toddler's pig-like ears. Michael did grab his index and pinky curiously, his hands dwarfed around the digits, but Schlatt paid him no mind and let him take interest in his hand.

"I don't know, Connor, how do *you* think he got here?" Schlatt questioned rhetorically, sarcasm dripping from his voice before it turned more casual with weavings of worry sewn into his cadence. "He walked over here, obviously. He was frozen solid when he woke me up."

Maybe he was over-exaggerating, but he was cold. And being cold as a kid sucked.

"Why though?" Connor looked at Michael again, wide-eyed and sharing Schlatt's concerned sentiments more prominently than he did.

"Stop asking me shi- stuff, Connor, I don't know! He's quirky, maybe he went outside and got turned around," Schlatt groaned. He glanced over to Michael, who had looked to be dozing off

with his head nodding off periodically. “Kid’s got a weird obsession with me or something, so maybe he came here on his own.”

“In this weather? He’s lucky he didn’t get buried,” Connor said, looking out the frosted window near the front door. The pitch black of the night was only illuminated by the lanterns hanging from the roof’s edges, and the lights from a few houses in the distance. Snow blew down in furious flurries, promising a morning of shoveling snow until the sun would be well into the sky.

There were fresh wet marks from snow being tracked in on the floor, indicating the piglin had come through the door, opening and closing it despite looking like he could barely reach the handle.

“We should tell Sam, he can bring him back to Tubbo’s before the dude has an aneurysm. Hopefully, he hasn’t been gone for too long,” Connor suggested, turning on his heel to go to the ladder leading to the creeper’s room.

“... Oh shit,” Schlatt felt the drop in the air, like the chill in the cabin had become ten degrees colder with sudden apprehension of what was to come.

And as if to really rub in the elevated tension that overcame the ram, there was a distant scream from the house down the hill.

####

Really, it was surprising how long he held out this week.

After a manic sweep of the basement and the cellar and finding nothing of Michael, Tubbo had returned to the living room in a complete daze. Panic swam through the muddled fog that clouded most of his rational thought, and his movements were heavy and forced while Ranboo seemed to dash around the entire house in a bi-colored blur. The enderman’s voice trembled slightly, and it was understandable as he opened closets and common hide-n-seek spots to find that their son was nowhere to be found.

Even while Tubbo was panicking internally, he couldn’t feel it fully. In fact, his entire body felt cold and numb, goosebumps covering his skin as he stared blankly into the wooden floor, the dark spots becoming harder and harder to blink away.

He hated it. He hated how he couldn’t feel anything when he knew he should feel something. He hated how he couldn’t bring himself to move, to search, to do *SOMETHING* to help. A small voice in his head echoed his frustrations, making sure to remind him that he was being useless, that he was weak, that it shouldn’t be a surprise he can’t keep track of a toddler when he couldn’t hold together a country, or a family for that matter. It made sure to tell him that he brought this upon himself, and that if he had just sucked it up and slept, or if he had been more observant, or if he had just never lived through the wars or the bunker, none of this would be happening.

Everyone dies around him. Everyone gets hurt when he tries to care about them. Everyone eventually leaves when they don't need him anymore.

He loses time and time again: in *wars* , with *lives* , with *people* . Why did he think it would be different here?

Those were the intrusive thoughts planted into his head, loud and clear on who they believed was the common denominator in every equation. And despite his best efforts, he found himself falling for their poisoned lies as he swayed dangerously on his feet. Everything felt so heavy around him, and he swore he could hear someone talking, or maybe yelling. Nothing was clear to him anymore.

White noise became the ambient sounds around Tubbo. His vision fell dark and everything seemed to melt away around him. All he could feel was the rapid pulse of his heartbeat in his chest faltering every other beat. The voice stopped berating him suddenly, and his mind felt uncomfortably empty. His breathing stilled and his body felt like it was oscillating in place steadily.

Before he completely fell unconscious, he could smell burning gunpowder and saw flickers of fireworks in the corners of his eyes.

~~####~~

Something was wrong.

Wilbur had always been the observant one, followed in suit by Tubbo and Fundy. They always had a knack for being able to read people, or at least that's how Tommy saw it. For him, on the other hand, he was dense when it came to social cues and body language. He could usually judge by a person's voice, but if it was a matter of trying to tell if someone was lying or hiding something, he usually couldn't tell the difference. His deductive skills were nothing compared to Tubbo's, and any sense of emotional intelligence was minute in contrast to Fundy or Wilbur's. But he likes to think he's made up for it in high loyalty to his family.

(A phantom voice snickered in the back of his head, and he pushed away the accusations of hypocrisy and lying. He didn't like how it sounded like his family's voices meshed together, with the cocky echoes of Dream repeating their words quietly but with potency.)

That said, Puffy was a shit liar.

They had all been staying at her house for the week, and while Tommy would've complained

about being cooped up in the small home, he found enjoyment in resuming his bickering and playful banter with both Wilbur and Fundy. It at least passed the time a lot more than he thought, and the food was more than delightful when Puffy cooked (Fundy and Tommy had both attempted to cook dinner one night; it resulted in a near total house fire).

He was eager to ramble on about the things Wilbur had missed and needed to catch up on. He was careful to avoid some of the less important details, like the whole exile thing and Techno's cabin, or siding with L'Manberg and his subsequent disownment from the family (joining Tubbo and Fundy, who had been disowned after the Butcher Army situation), along with most of the bunker situation that Wilbur wasn't already informed of. Really, it wasn't *that* important to the retellings, and he was glad Fundy thought so too, given he never tried to correct his timeline of events. Tommy also conveniently skipped over the fox's engagement and failed wedding and betrayal at the final battle, because it wasn't important to the overall story either. If Fundy had a problem with that, he never spoke up about it.

(What Tommy glossed over was the way Fundy eyed him with sympathy, faintly grimacing when he lied about being let off the hook for house arson and 'retiring' his position as vice-president to go on a vacation for a while. He also missed the way Wilbur would stiffen when Tommy mentioned the 'vacation', and how he always seemed on the edge of asking something before holding his tongue and smiling at Tommy's stories, all the while he anxiously picked at his nails.)

Very few people came to visit Puffy during the week, as the arrival of Wilbur (and Schlatt, which upon learning made both Tommy and Fundy want to start another war. It was almost impossible to convince them to stay when they found out he was in SnowChester with Tubbo) was to stay on the down-low for a while. Just until things settled down, and Wilbur and Schlatt completely readjusted to the mortal world again (Fundy and Tommy cried with laughter one afternoon when Wilbur ran into a door, accidentally thinking he could still walk through solid material).

Eret was the only consistent visitor, stopping by with baked goods and news from around the SMP every afternoon and staying until late evening. Nothing major was happening, just tidbits of antics and news of some new kingdom being established to the west of the Central SMP.

They always had a tense strain with Wilbur that Tommy could pick up on, but Fundy seemed to be the bridge between the two of them that softened the hard stares that Eret casted at Wilbur whenever he spoke. Their conversations were, for the most part, polite and short, with Wilbur mostly just listening as Fundy and Tommy spoke to the king.

(Again, Tommy missed the way Eret always had a hand resting on their hip right next to the handle of their sword, or the way they always tried to stand in between the group and Wilbur whenever they were all talking.)

Eret had been thoughtful enough to bring clothes for all of them the first day, including Wilbur. It was refreshing to see him not in the mangled trenchcoat and crusty white shirt, now sporting a series of brightly colored crew-neck sweaters and jeans. Briefly, Tommy had wondered if any of Wilbur's old clothes were still left in Pogtopia.

The only other person to visit was Jack, who showed up early one morning to ask Puffy a question about where Tommy had been. Luckily, the conversation had stayed at the door, the trio hiding behind the couch and out of sight while Puffy crafted some explanation. She said that he had probably gone off adventuring and would wander back eventually, to which Jack accepted and went off on his way after a few more words were exchanged.

(Tommy didn't notice how Wilbur's hold around him and Fundy became overly protective, and how his older brother seemed to bristle furiously at the voice of Tommy's business partner. He was

pleasantly content with his brother's clinginess the rest of the day, despite how much he teased him and adamantly denied enjoying it.)

Other than all of that, the week was pretty boring. There was so much Tommy wanted to show his brother outside of the confines of the house, and photos on his phone could only do so much to really lay in how much had changed around the SMP. Fundy wasn't as enthusiastic as Tommy was, but Tommy could be excited for his fox nephew.

(In fact, Fundy had been less excited about telling Wilbur anything about the SMP than Tommy. Sure, he was over the moon when he got to talk about his inventions he had made and his dabbles in engineering and coding, but when it came to explaining things, he left most of it to Tommy. The teen assumed it was because he was objectively the better storyteller, but if he paid attention, he would've seen the way Fundy would glance over to Wilbur frequently, searching for something in his father that wasn't obvious to Tommy as he focused on embellishing his stories with exaggerations and glory he knew Wilbur would appreciate. And what Fundy was searching for was the gleam of recognition in Wilbur's eyes when Tommy retold specific events; the way he brightened or scowled too subtly for Tommy to pick up on, but not enough for Fundy.)

It was an official week of Wilbur being back when Tommy felt something off.

The day itself felt weirdly tense. Nothing had happened between anyone, but it still felt like something was clouding over Tommy, refusing to give him a moment's reprieve from the bad feeling he was getting in his stomach. He tried to brush it off as the clams Puffy made for dinner the previous night not agreeing with him, but this felt much different than a regular stomach ache. This was one of his gut feelings, the kind of odd anticipation for something to happen but mixed with his uncertainty of when it was *going* to happen.

Fundy was acting weird, too, which was saying something because he always found it nearly impossible to read his nephew accurately. Tommy vaguely remembers waking up in the dead of night to Fundy having moved from his spot on the couch he shared with him, standing in the kitchen and leaned over a counter. He couldn't remember clearly, but he may have been scratching at the top of his head, something he only ever did if he was nervous. Tommy fell back asleep shortly after Wilbur seemed to stir on the couch across from him. When he really woke up that morning, Fundy had still abandoned his spot on the couch with Tommy, but was instead sprawled on top of Wilbur, both of them looking a lot more tired than they should've been while sleeping. The rest of the day, the fox was jumpier than usual, and Tommy quickly learned to leave him be instead of trying to playfully bicker with him.

Wilbur at least kept up with Tommy's spirit, keeping a close eye on Fundy but still entertaining the teen by playing card games, or teasing him about being clingy when Tommy hung off of him while Wilbur tried to make lunch with Puffy.

Speaking of Puffy, she was most obviously perturbed by something. She had been the past few days, Tommy had noticed, but it never seemed all that important because he was too busy focused on Wilbur and Fundy to really care. However, mixed with the ugly feeling building up inside of him, Fundy's anxious behavior, and Puffy's incessant texting on her phone, Tommy was ready to get to the bottom of this. And that he did.

At the dinner table.

“Puffy, why are you so... Stiff?” The word didn’t sound right in his mouth, but he didn’t know how else to put it as he set his fork down, pushing away his spaghetti and looking around the house.

She looked up from her food and the rest of the occupants of the table stopped eating, intrigued by the hook of the conversation. “I-I don’t know what you mean by that, Tommy.”

“I mean stiff as in like, I dunno.. You seem stressed or something. Yeah,” He explained himself, ignoring the way his face reddened slightly when he realized he could’ve just said the latter in the first place.

“Oh. Um,” Puffy toiled with her next words, the silence at the table only increasing the apprehension in the air. Fundy bit at his claws while Wilbur was somewhat stoic, constantly moving his eyes around the table as he rested his head on propped up elbows. Tommy continued to look anywhere but Puffy’s face, fiddling with his fingers absent-mindedly. When she spoke next, her voice was so painfully obvious that she was lying it made him cringe inwardly. “It’s nothing, Tommy. Sam is... Sam’s annoying me, is all.”

Tommy hummed, and that’s where the conversation was left at.

It was better to not push questions than be lied to, even when it was so blatantly clear. Tommy, had it been months ago, would’ve pressed and pressed until he either got the answer he wanted or was properly shooed away. Now, he was a little bit wiser. Being lied to was something he despised, but it was integral to his life, and it was a cross he had to bear for the sake of everyone else. So, to avoid at least being told lies, he simply stopped asking when they didn’t tell the truth the first time.

He himself was a hypocrite in hating lies, after all, he had spent the entire week telling Wilbur about his so called ‘vacation’ when he ‘retired’ and how much fun it had been (he still hasn’t fully admitted to anyone what fully happened in exile, not even to Tubbo, and he surely wasn’t starting with his older, recently revived brother). He still hadn’t fessed up about Techno or Phil being a part of the final destruction with Dream, or how they had actually orchestrated it for the most part. He lied about how dire and desperate the situation was on the mountain when Dream cornered him and Tubbo.

He felt guilty for each deceiving word that left his mouth, but he tried to convince himself that it was for the good of Wilbur. He didn’t need to know about everything just yet. Maybe later, when he settled in, or maybe never (preferably) would be when he would break the news. Or maybe someone else could do it, and then Wilbur could be mad at him for a few days, and then they could work it out.

(The thought of Wilbur being cross with him brought back a ghostly tingle on his cheek and flickers of lime-green to seep deep into his bones, and he hated the way his heart picked up pace despite being completely idle.)

Dinner finished quickly after that, with the task of washing the dishes being left to him and Fundy

while Wilbur and Puffy cleaned the table. He could hear their hushed voices talking to one another, but the sound of the sink running and dishes clattering together obscured any chance of understanding them. He even looked to Fundy for help, but upon seeing the way one ear angled painfully backward and how he leaned back slightly, he knew the fox wasn't having much luck either.

It was fairly quiet for the rest of the evening, Puffy joining their game of Uno that still had not ended (Tommy was certain Fundy was cheating, because there was no way he could have *that* many plus two's in his paws) from the afternoon. Wilbur was the first to forfeit his hand, officially teaming with Puffy to help take down the monster that was Fundy, and not long after that Puffy had forfeited her hand as well. The game ended when Tommy saw Fundy's trick (which was that he had at least half a deck of wildcards and plus four's and two's up his sleeve that he slowly carted into his hand whenever he had to draw) and proceeded to try and wrestle him for the win. He won, of course, because he was Tommy, and Tommy took zero L's.

As they all winded down for the night, Puffy ended up falling asleep in an armchair while Fundy had cemented himself on Wilbur's couch, curled up on one side despite the entire couch readily being open. Wilbur ended up falling asleep on the floor, head resting on the edge of the couch cushions in front of Fundy. None of them changed into pyjamas, so he cringed at the sight of them all sleeping in jeans before going into the bathroom to change into a gray hoodie and red flannel pyjama pants.

Tommy was the only one left awake in the dim house, having already covered everyone else in blankets and laid across the opposite couch staring at the ceiling. After the jubilant mood that had come from the Uno match and the serene quiet of the house, it left Tommy with that strange feeling once more. But with nothing to distract him from it, it only grew more and more with every passing minute he wasn't asleep.

He couldn't help but try to figure out if the day was significant in any way, but nothing came to mind. If he had missed something like a holiday or a birthday, he would've been informed by someone else, surely? He didn't understand why his subconscious was so keen on telling him he was missing something, and it was going to continue to bug him until it either went away or it was proven right.

He didn't notice how much time had passed until he was snapped from his trance by a faint buzzing beneath him. The living room was completely dark, so much in fact he could barely see the other couch across from him, and he would bet if he looked outside, it would be the same deal. The lanterns of the house had long been put out, with only one on the dining table emitting any sort of light, although it was weak and flickering like it was ready to die out any minute.

Ignoring the fact he could barely see, he sat up and felt around for the strange buzzing, finding his hand fishing the creases of the couch cushions before his hands brushed against something metallic, the rhythmic buzzing now directly on his fingertips. He grabbed it and pulled it out from the cushions before being temporarily blinded by the light it emitted. Blinking away the irritation, Tommy realized it was Puffy's phone, probably having found its way into the couch while playing Uno.

What was interesting, though, was that it was Sam calling.

At two in the morning.

Strange? Tommy believed so. And given his curiosity as to why Puffy was so stressed, maybe answering the call and asking Sam why she was so off would be more effective than trying to wait for her to tell him. Sam was honest to Tommy, so he'd definitely tell him what's up if he asked in good conscience.

Besides, it had been a few days since he'd been rebellious. He needed his fix, and answering one harmless phone call never hurt anybody. It wasn't like he was burning down someone's house or anything.

(He quickly decided he hated that comparison.)

He knew answering the call inside was a dumb move, since everyone was so close quarters and he'd probably wake everyone up the second he clicked the answer button. So, carefully he crept off of the couch, making each of his steps light and quick as he scampered across the rest of the house towards the front door, phone still buzzing violently in hand. Taking one last look at the group in the living room to make sure they were still asleep, he slowly cracked open the front door and slipped out, shutting it ever so gently behind him.

The front lawn was bathed in pitch darkness and there was a drizzle of rain coming down from the thick, gray clouds in the sky. The street lamps ahead on the Prime Path and the fairy light strung above him were the only other source of light in the night. The cold breeze blew into his face like a greeting, causing him to shiver despite the warm clothes he had on.

He brought his attention back down to the phone, which was still buzzing and who's screen was still lit up with the caller ID being Sam. Checking over his shoulder one more time, he went to press the answer call button-.

When the call abruptly stopped, the phone screen returning to the black screen and the buzzing stopping in his hand.

Well, that was anticlimactic.

Tommy sighed and let his hands fall to his sides, disappointed with the missed opportunity. However, adrenaline rushed briefly through his veins when he felt a short buzz go through the phone, and he eagerly lifted the phone to read the message Sam had left. If he was going back inside, he at least wanted the late-night gossip Sam was so desperate to share that it couldn't wait for the morning.

Sam

Cara, I need you to come to SnowChester as soon as you can. Tubbo just had a literal heart attack.

The phone fell to the ground, abandoned on the pebble-stone path as the teenager sprinted and mounted Puffy's horse in its nearby paddock, kicking it into a gallop before they disappeared down north on the Prime Path.

####

Somewhere far, far from the borders of the Central SMP, there laid a city.

This city bustled with life, with the constant honking of horns and people walking and hustling harmonizing with the flashing lights of billboards and building signs attempting to lure in people like moths.

Inside the city's center laid the main attraction: a casino.

And inside this casino, when you slip into the back halls, away from the constant clinking of coins and arcade-type sounds of money being wasted away, and weave your way up flights of stairs and even more hallways; there is an office.

In that office, a man sat at his desk, a desk lamp illuminating the envelope he had just received. His desk was an utter mess, with paperwork and poker chips strewn across its surface, but it had all been pushed aside once he dumped out the contents of the envelope.

He held one of the several pictures in disbelief, holding it closer underneath the light to confirm what he was seeing.

In the colorless picture was a horned man holding a small piglin, a familiar moobloom-hybrid stood off the side with anxiety twisted across his entire body. They didn't seem to know they were being photographed.

The rest of the pictures were of the same horned man, each different from the last. But he only needed one to know who it was.

With the pictures came a letter, and his wide eyes scanned the paper multiple times despite there only being few words scribbled down:

Your partner in crime has returned. I bet he misses you, sugar pumpkin :)

He crumbled the letter and stood up, grabbing his jacket blazer from off of his chair and storming out of his office. When he passed by an employee, he didn't pay them any mind as he made his way outside to the back of the casino. There was a stable where he had kept his crème-white mare well-cared for, and he wasted no time in getting her saddled up.

She stomped her hooves in excitement as he led her out of her stall, pulling himself into the saddle hastily before she took the initiative and began going into a canter down the pavement road. It had been so long since they had gone on a ride.

His diamond sword rested in a sheathe on the saddle, and he routinely eyed it to make sure it was still there as the pavement of the city became the firm ground of grassland. The fresh air of the untamed Badlands would've been refreshing if his concern and fury hadn't been the only thing he could process at the moment.

Quackity was going to kill Schlatt before he could do anything more to that already broken boy.

####

A small cabin in the middle of nowhere was dark, the occupants supposedly asleep.

However, an older man was sitting at a desk in his room, gazing over photos that had come from the strange envelope one of his crows had brought him underneath the candlelight.

Pictures of someone who was supposed to be dead, holding a fox-hybrid close and tightly.

Pictures of someone who was supposed to be dead, climbing from a crater he died in.

Pictures of someone who was supposed to be dead, cradling a blonde teenager and the same fox-hybrid in an emotional group hug.

Pictures of someone who was supposed to be dead, *because he had killed his son.*

Silent tears fell onto the pictures and stained the piece of paper that had accompanied the pictures, a neat cursive methodically written and composed that couldn't ever be replicated by anyone else but his son.

I'm sorry for the delay, but they have me hostage somewhere in the Central SMP. That's all I know. Help.

It wasn't long before he had woken up his remaining son and they packed for the trip, swords sharpened and axes polished with fresh potions brewed and plenty of food packed.

His gray wings beat against the cold air in the sky while he watched his son ride a horse below, both of them headed straight for the small dock they had built months ago but never used.

The night was frigid, but a warmth burned in his chest, and he couldn't help but let a smile tug at his lips, despite the anxiety that coiled around his heart.

Phil would tear apart that damned country if it meant Wilbur would be back in his arms again.

###

"∴.L:ff;" S ⊥J/ ĤL·L·ĤTJL·κ S→S/ JY. T. TL·JY/ κ/ SJ ∴.SffY. "T T/ Y ∴. /ff
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:)

###

Here's the author's recreation of the DreamSMP layout for your visual aide and enjoyment
(remember to read end notes pls)



Chapter End Notes

look at my map. isn't it just a wonderful map? also, tubbo. i. i love him guys i swear but he's literally perfect for angst im sORRY-

how would you guys feel if i did little one-off chapters that were shorter and focused on some past events? like wilbur's childhood, or tommy's time with techno, or tubbo, fundy, tommy reconciling at the crater, or even schlatt and connor's falling out? should i make them their own pieces or should i sprinkle them through the book? here's a google form to help me decide!!

google form link (copy paste into url): <https://forms.gle/KWKJz6SiKPNMEkra9>

also, i am planning on writing a much more lighthearted, modern version of SBI soon alongside this series, so make sure to subscribe to my user and i will update y'all with the progress on my discord server!!! the link is below, and i hope you join! you'll receive sneak peeks of chapters, updates as soon as the chapters go live, and also just have a place to chill with fellow dsmp fans and creators :33

discord link (copy paste into url): <https://discord.gg/23YrexNx5Y>

as always, i am tired, i need to probably fix my sleep schedule, and i hope y'all have a fantastic day :3

Chapter Notes

not having a point A makes it very hard to get to point B. i say this because i rewrote this chapter five times, and it was split in half, so we are adding a chapter to the count.

20,000 HITS??? AYUP???? WTF THANK YALL????? IM PLANNING A MILESTONE GIFT HOPEFULLY, SEE UPDATES IN MY DISCORD SERVER ABOUT IT: <https://discord.gg/y2fjw3rSbx>

also, I PREDICTED WILBUR BIRDSHIT HAIR LETS
G000

Anyways, 13500+ words, enjoy what took a month and so much emotional energy to make, i hope it's worth the wait ;]

CREDIT TO @drink.wine.do.crime on TikTok for helping me name this chapter, go follow them rn because their tubbo cosplay is literally the inspiration for tubbo's description here :3

CREDIT TO @twitch.tv/shaunsaxum for being my wonderful editor and helping me revise chapters 3-5, which will be uploaded later today, go follow him he's funny and i join in on his streams periodically

TW: This chapter is heavy on MENTAL HEALTH, PANIC ATTACKS, and SUICIDE along with light depictions of hypothermia, blood, and gore.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The bench was cold.

Not that everything wasn't cold, the evening air dipping in temperature as Tommy pulled his jacket tighter on himself, rubbing his mittened hands together to muster just a little bit more warmth. The jacket, which was a bit big on him, would be recognizable to anyone who bothered to look at him, the edges fringed with burns and the brown material stained with ashes, buttons that should've been down the middle long picked off and leaving behind strings of yarn that once held them there.

He didn't ask to be given it, but ~~dad~~ Phil gave it to him a few days after Wilbur's death. It had been sitting in his enderchest, mocking him, asking to be thrown away or burned or abandoned somewhere Tommy would forget about it. He was too spiteful to give the coat that satisfaction, though, so there it laid, neatly folded in the bottom of the chest since.

But, because the rest of his clothes were either long blown to bits or left behind in a place he wasn't welcome, it was all he had to keep warm. So, begrudgingly, he had been wearing it, denying

that it was comforting despite the history that accompanied the fraying hems and hole-filled pockets and the lingering ashy scent.

It had been a few weeks since... well, since everything. It all happened so quickly, he was still spinning from the absurdity of the events that fell into an unfortunately neat timeline:

He had been forced to pick between his country or his discs, and lost both a father and a brother because of it; completely disowned, just like Tubbo and Fundy had been a month prior.

He watched the country that he had been exiled from twice and loved despite that, be blown to the deepest pits of the earth. He couldn't do anything other than keep himself and his only remaining brother alive through it all, leaving that battlefield with a phantom memory who's somber song brought only bittersweet memories, and freshly maimed skin that would provide him reminders of what he had caused.

Then, as if to make his life even more harder than it had to be, his house was destroyed. Again.

Despite barely having apologized to one another and still recovering from the devastation of New L'Manburg, he and Tubbo made the journey out to meet Dream. To settle the disc conflict.

He almost lost his last brother because of his overambitious pride.

Dream was imprisoned. They listened to mellohi. They spoke to Wilbur.

Everything should be okay. His happy ending was wrapped up in a neat little bow.

There was no more country Tommy needed to be loyal to, no more need to fear running into a lime-green sweatshirt, no more having to hear another damned firework or Wither groan ever again. He and Tubbo were cool, he thought, even though they barely made good on their promise to see each other as much as possible. Fundy had apologized for blaming the community house on him, and Tommy ignored the sting in his eyes when Fundy left without saying much else of importance. There was no word from Techno or Phil, which he had convinced himself was good despite feeling faintly homesick in his newly built house. Ghostbur seemed to have completely forgotten about the entire event, happily babbling on about whatever the ghost could, filling the vats of silence between them when Tommy was lost in thought, wandering aimlessly on the Prime Path like he was meant to go somewhere.

But, nothing was a fairytale in Tommy's life.

His days were plagued with dull, mundane tasks as winter hit its midpoint and the main SMP began to see peeks of greenery emerge again. Or maybe it was the recent explosions messing with the weather, because the air still smelled of faint fire and ash, and the area around L'Manberg (L'Manhole, as some described it) was completely void of anything but singed ground and dead earth. The temperature was unusually warm some days, and it wasn't the gentle warmth of a promising new season; it was the dry, stuffy warmth that came when the winds blew from the abandoned crater, carrying with it an aftertaste of decay and sorrow.

It wasn't spring, though. The cold still persisted, still hanging around Tommy's shoulders like heavy chains, always shackling his mind to reminiscence of memories hammering home the fact that he was a frozen husk.

The only time he felt warmth was because of the fires he started: his impulsive, harmless arson on a house quickly scorched it to the ground, and he was returned to the icy glares from George and the polar disappointment from Tubbo. The passionate fire in his heart when he brought the stolen reins of Dream's late horse to the masked man, who was building walls to try and quarantine the country from what he deemed a 'dangerous and unstable' vice-president. It filled him to the brim with spiteful, bitter warmth. That same fire was squashed and extinguished beneath the soles of Dream's boots when he threatened the country, ordering for Tommy's exile. The blonde's skin crawled with violent shivers when he was silently escorted away with nothing more than a mournful, longing stare from a brother he thought would always have his back, turning his own on Tommy as he cried out for him, held back by cold shackles connected to a chain, dragging him along until he could no longer fight its pull.

The warm sunshine of Logstedshire was washed out by the harsh words drilled into his head everyday. The burns of daily explosions were soothed by the cool bruises littered across his body. The stinging of his tearful eyes was surmounted by the casual, chipper conversation he would have with the very rare visitor, or Ghostbur before he forgot how to get back (or maybe he just stopped caring. Everyone stopped caring, if Tommy was being honest). The smoldering, painful breaths he took were counteracted by the whistling of the rain-filled wind as he stood on his tower, looking down upon the devastation he caused, that he brought upon himself.

His frozen body that was warmed by the fireplace of a stranger's home. The cold, damp cavern below the house was barely used once Techno discovered Tommy living there a day or so later after he arrived, dressing his thin, disheveled frame with thick furs and feeding Tommy burning hot soup to get rid of the growing malady in his chest. The hot, angry ball of fury and resentment and every bad feeling he could think of fanned the heat of arguments in L'Manberg, facing Tubbo for the first time in those long, painstakingly slow months that went by (without even a word, at that). That warmth was met with the ice-cold stare of a terrifying mask, one that demanded Tommy follow him, only for Techno to stop the demands. The shaking in his hands wasn't calmed when he was shushed, the talk of a favor being put on the table.

*Tommy finally learned what he was at that moment. He wasn't a martyr, he was a favor. He wasn't a brother, he was a business transaction. He wasn't a hero, he was **a liability** .*

He became numb. When he 'betrayed' Techno, he was numb, even though his eyes filled with tears. When he watched his own father - the one who had wept when he stumbled into Techno's cabin and found Tommy asleep on the couch, the one he thought still loved him and their family despite everything, the one who tried to reconnect with Tommy, even if it was out of guilt and pity - destroy his country with a laugh and grin, Tommy felt numb for everything except the searing pain that was painted across almost every part of his body.

His weak smiles were devoid of emotion, his words had no bite to them anymore. He had little hope when he and Tubbo set out to fight Dream. He tried, he so desperately tried to force himself to muster his old charisma that had been long-lost to time for Tubbo's sake, but his horned brother didn't notice the way his words were forced. Or maybe he didn't care. Tommy could see the empty stare mirroring his own in Tubbo's blue eyes, and it became an unspoken agreement that they wouldn't talk about it as they sailed across the open sea.

*The last spark of warmth he ever felt was when Tubbo was saying his final goodbyes to Tommy in the bunker. It was weak, but enough to make him babble nonsense, trying to make plans to escape, making useless deals to save his brother, his only family he had left. He had sacrificed himself all too much for Tommy, and for Tubbo to once again do it, one final time; it felt **unfair**.*

He was numb when the melodies of mellohi played, and when he heard the voice of his dead brother speak to him. He was numb when Tubbo left quietly afterwards, Tommy sitting on the bench until night forced him home. And now, even, he was numb as he waited for his horned brother to show, only the biting cold to remind him that he was still there.

Winter seemed endless for the blonde, its cold grasp following him through the reconstruction of New L'Manberg, freezing him in his lonely nights in Logstedshire, and nearly killing him in Techno's tundra.

*It was for the best, he figured, to be cold and numb. It was better for everyone to dislike him, to not want to be associated with him, to not need to feel the need to check in with him. It was great that Tommy had no inclination to be angry with anyone, that he didn't feel upset about the lack of care he received, because after all, what had they done that meant he deserved to be upset with them? He was better off alone, away from causing people grief and pain that inevitably followed him. Saving them the time when he'd screw up, when he'd betray them one way or another. Keeping them from caring about a problem-child who was selfish, self-conceited; a **brat**.*

(His thoughts were never his own anymore. They always were followed by a malicious, tea-kettle wheeze or an indifferent snort.)

As the moon rose higher and higher in the sky, Tommy stared out into the starless night. He had sat here every day for the past week, expecting Tubbo or Fundy to come by eventually, like they had promised. He wasn't holding them to it, though. He had broken plenty of his own, so they were allowed to have a free pass. He just secretly wished it wasn't this one.

Still, he sat, a music disc laid on his lap and his breath crystallizing in the air. Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting, until nothing but the sun told him that it was a fruitless endeavor, creeping up the skyline and being the only one to witness the lonely tears that silently fell down his face. Because even when Tommy denied it, he hated the solitude. He hated being alone. He hated that he had resigned himself to this fate by his own choice, by his past actions. He had been left to brave cold reality on his own, and everyday it felt like he slipped deeper and deeper into the snow.

He had lived with loneliness before, and he was a cruel bastard. And once Tommy thought he had gotten rid of him, he was too late to see it wasn't loneliness that was the problem:

It was him.

####

"Tubbo! Hey!"

Tubbo turned to face the familiar voice, seeing Fundy running to catch up to him from a little ways down the Prime Path. He was wearing a black hoodie and jeans with his signature hat missing from his head, gloves covering his paw-hands and carrying a lead attached to an all too familiar blue sheep, who was less than enthusiastic to be jogging alongside the fox-hybrid.

"Fundy? What are you doing so far from Eret's place?" He asked suspiciously as his nephew came nearer, crossing his hands over his chest lazily.

The fox panted as he drew to a halt, taking a few deep breaths before replying. "I'm trying to find Ghostbur. He left Friend in the courtyard and the sheep kept trying to eat my equipment."

Tubbo hummed, looking at Friend who stared back blankly, bleating at him like he was supposed to do something.

"I see. Well, if you flagged me down to ask, I wouldn't know where he's gotten off to," Tubbo answered honestly, taking a step back to resume his walk. "I'll ask Tommy when I see him. I'm pretty sure Ghostbur hangs out with him the most these days."

"Is that where you're off to?" Fundy questioned, ears perking up just the slightest bit. "Mind if I tag along, then?"

"If you want," Tubbo shrugged, turning away from him and continuing his walk. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind too much."

"Great."

The pair walked side by side in silence, the gentle morning breeze nice beneath the clear blue sky and sun refreshing after spending long, gloomy weeks in the snowy wilderness. That's all it had been there; gloomy, with the addition of constant blizzards that forced him to take shelter for days at a time.

Better than being so close to this place, though.

It was a hard life out there, but nothing he couldn't handle with the amount of wilderness training and expertise he had gained over the years. He was able to build a livable cabin, and with the help of Ranboo and Jack, he began to really develop the area, with the makings of a seaport and a bunker being created at the moment.

"So," Fundy said. "I hear you've been busy."

Tubbo only hummed in response, looking down at the path he walked on. Friend bleated again, moving to walk in front of Fundy.

"Are you sure you're ready to be a president so soon-?"

"I'm not a president."

He adamantly made it clear that this was not a new country to anyone who may have come across the place. It was simply a town. A town he was the founder of. There was little else about it other than being open to anyone who wanted to settle down somewhere away from the chaos.

He still had yet to figure out a name for it.

"Oh," Fundy murmured, seeming to think about his next words before speaking again in a defeated sigh. "Sorry."

"It's fine."

There were a lot of things that weren't okay.

"How're you doing? After... well, y'know," Fundy asked awkwardly after some time had passed between the two. Friend baa'd once more.

"Fine. Why do you ask?" Maybe he sounded a little defensive. Maybe he sounded a little irritated. After all, he didn't expect to be questioned on the spot by his nephew he had barely seen in months, let alone talked with. Tubbo genuinely thought that Fundy had left the SMP for good until he saw him at the bunker, standing beside Eret with an axe and shield.

"Am I not allowed to check-in with my family?" Fundy questioned with a nervous chuckle, probably looking at Tubbo expectantly despite the moobloom's intense focus of the path beneath his feet.

"Are we still family?"

The painful question had left his mouth too quickly to save, stopping his steps as he looked up to Fundy, who had also stopped with Friend still pulling ahead, baa'ing impatiently before tugging the lead from Fundy's paw and walking off on his own. The look on the fox's face was dumbstruck, looking Tubbo in the eye with a kind of hurt he was all too familiar with while he stared back, mouth opening and closing as he clambered for something, anything to make it better.

"I.. Fundy I didn't mean it like that-"

"I need to go get Friend. I'll see you around."

And just like that, it was now Tubbo chasing after Fundy, a million and one apologies forming in his head as he tried to get the fox to slow down.

####

"Tommy! Hello! What are you doing down here?"

Tommy jumped, nearly falling over onto the hard rock beneath his feet and dropping the bottle in his hands. The glass shattered shrilly on the ground, the potion inside spilling its contents into the deep cracks in the rocky floor with a hiss.

He was glad he had brought spares. He had a feeling he'd break one on his way down the crater, so he wanted to play it safe with an extra. Now, it was just annoying that he had to get the other one out from his small bag leaning against the pole of the flag. The pole had been placed in the crater's cracks, an old, singed L'Manberg flag hanging lifeless on its tacks.

Not bothering to face the ghost, Tommy rummaged through his bag, taking out one of his discs and placing it against the pole with the poppies and alliums he had gathered into a rushed bouquet.

"Oh, are you not in the mood to talk again? That's fine, I can talk for the both of us," Ghostbur chirped, his chilling presence creeping up on Tommy as he floated above him, messing with the flag.

He really wished Ghostbur would go away.

"Are those flowers? They are just lovely! You're so thoughtful, y'know? No one has thought about bringing flowers here, it really lightens up the awfulness of this place."

Where was the damn bottle? He knew he had packed it-

"Oh, and your disc! You have two of these, right? Oh, I just wish I had my record player, we could listen to it here. Really, we should fix this place up. This is a great start, Tommy, really great!"

Why was his vision so blurry? Why was he shaking? He had the bottle in his hands now, he just had to open it-

“You know, I don’t quite remember how L’Manberg had gone so downhill. Maybe I’ve been away for too long. You should speak to Tubbo about the state of things, he really oughta-,” Tommy suddenly felt ice-cold hands cupping his face, forcing him to look up at the worried white eyes of someone that should be dead. He could hear the sizzling of gray skin making contact with the frustrated tears streaming down his face.

“Oh no, Toms, what’s the matter? Maybe you should take a break from being a vice-president, you’re still young and need some free-time once in a while. Here, have some blue,” The hands were pulled from his face, Tommy wiping at his eyes with a free hand before lapis was placed in it, the other still tightly gripping the neck of the potion bottle. “Honestly, you’d think that some people would think twice before putting so much pressure on you. You gave away a lot of things for this place, as rundown as it is. I think you deserve-”

“I don’t deserve anything,” Tommy’s words were so quiet and feeble, he wasn’t surprised Ghostbur didn’t catch them.

“- another vacation. Maybe we can invite Tubbo this time- oh! And Fundy, too! It would be a great father/son bonding experience. We can all hang out, just like it used to be.”

Tommy wanted to explode.

“Ghostbur, please stop-.”

“We could bring Friend, but where would we go? Definitely not somewhere with lots of water, or a beach because we went there last time - maybe we could go camping! Oh, I can just see it now; a bonfire, smores, hiking, oh it’ll just be so much fun for you all! Friend would enjoy the wilderness, I would like it because there is no water to be splashed with - everyone wins! Phil and Techno could join, they’d probably love to join. I know you guys don’t get along, but maybe we can all bond and get over our differences as a family! What do you think, Toms?”

“... Toms?”

“Tommy, are you okay?”

####

“Fundy! Fundy!”

Tubbo had been following him despite his attempts to thwart the moobloom, refusing to take no for an answer. Why should he stop, though? Tubbo didn’t want him to bother him in the first place, so why keep burdening him any longer than he had been?

He knew he was being petty. He knew Tubbo wanted nothing more than to apologize. That still didn’t fix the gap between them; between their entire family as a whole. Apologies, words, they

meant little to anything when it came from anyone he was close with. A fact he learned a little late and forgot about most days, but in times like this, he was almost envious of his past faithfulness to people's promises and justifications (the same promises and justifications that left him brokenhearted and alone for no reason other than for people's gain).

So, he continued to ignore the teenager who was hot on his tail, refusing to leave him alone even as he turned down a path he knew led towards L'Manhole. He hoped that maybe it would ward him off, but it proved useless for the moobloom's stubbornness.

It had been awhile since he had seen the abysmal sight, but it looked even worse in the sunlight, the shadows of the crater more pronounced and the ring of dead earth surrounding it emanating a sharp smell beneath the sun. Large pieces of debris still not cleared out laid all around the Prime Path, who took its own fair share of damage, new wood visible against the charred outlines of where pieces had broken off in the chaos of that day.

Fundy continued walking, prying his eyes from the crater's edge and focusing on the road ahead. If he kept going, he'd make it back to Eret's castle. Tubbo wouldn't follow him in there, at least he hoped. If he did, then that would be a problem in and of itself, and Eret would probably come investigate why Fundy was back so soon. If they were still home, that was.

He had spent most of his time in the castle alone nowadays, Eret usually being out dealing with diplomatic matters that Fundy never concerned himself with. They had invited him a few times, but Fundy denied them each offer until they eventually stopped asking, simply giving Fundy the heads-up before leaving.

He really did appreciate Eret's kindness for taking him in, for letting him take over the courtyard to make his own personal testing site. He was thankful the monarch still cared about him even after the troubled past they both shared, and that Eret did their absolute best to try and fill the vacuum left behind after the first war.

It still wasn't home. It never could be, and Eret knew that.

Fundy's home had perished long before it was ever salvageable to reconstruct, no matter how many decorations or pretty titles he could be given, nor could it be made anew with someone else. His family was his only link back to that place, and even that had shattered into a scrambled mess. And if Tubbo said what he meant, which held little doubt in the fox's mind, then Fundy had lost that as well. He betrayed them many times, and not without reason. He had apologized to little avail, and he became an outsider.

As the way an apple falls, he assumed. It was only a matter of time before he was completely ousted from the shambles of this family, and he guessed he should be thankful it was now rather than when they were all closer. Everybody leaves him eventually, and if they didn't want him, well, he didn't want them either by that logic. He would be perfectly fine without them, he survived without them plenty of times before. This time, it was just more of a final decision.

That didn't stop him from wishing this was one of his dreams. That he'd wake up in bed, and he would forget the nasty words his subconscious wanted him to hear.

“Fundy, wait! I really didn’t mean it! I was being stupid, just give me a chance to-”

“To what?” Fundy turned to face Tubbo, stopping in the path and causing the moobloom to run into his chest, stumbling back with an oof as he looked up at Fundy with remorse. Friend pulled at the lead, and he let it go, the sheep’s hooves clicking down the Path as he spoke to his young uncle. “A chance to explain? To apologize? It’s not like I got a chance to do that, so why should I give you one?”

Tubbo was dumbfounded, starting sentences before abruptly shutting his mouth to try and reform his words. Fundy didn’t give him time to try to answer, though. He was impatient, and he felt like he deserved to be.

“You know what, Tubbo? It’s fine, alright? I don’t care,” He spat, glaring at the teen with all of the venom and hurt he honestly didn’t realize existed, hidden beneath the placid smiles and layers of blanketed trauma he folded into a neat pile in the corner of his mind, left to collect dust until now, it seemed. “I don’t need your apologies, or your pity, or anything! It barely matters, so save it for yourself. It would probably do you some good.”

Now it was Tubbo’s turn to furrow his brow, nose scrunching up like it always did when he was pissed. “Fundy, I’m not trying to pity you, I want to say I’m sorry! Has living up in that castle, all safe and pampered gone to your head?”

“I live there because I’m not wanted anywhere else!”

“Maybe if you had some sense of loyalty-!”

“Don’t even try that bullshit, Tubbo! It never mattered if I was loyal or not - I was always either the butt of the joke or I was grouped with the villains! I never had the chance to be a fucking hero!”

“You never had the chance to be a hero because you never tried like we did!”

“Yeah, and where did that land you and Tommy, huh?! One life left, despised by most of the SMP, pitied by the rest, scarred in every shape and form, and completely different from the kids I grew up with!”

Fundy took a few breaths, waiting for Tubbo to bite back with something smart, something that would point out a fallacy in Fundy’s statement.

They both knew Fundy was right, and so Tubbo stayed silent, averting his gaze and clenching his fists tightly as he glared tearful daggers into the path beneath him.

It was a few more moments before Fundy spoke again, the anger in his voice fading as it was replaced with solemn bitterness.

“We grew up too fast for each other. There’s no point in trying to play house anymore.”

###

Tommy wasn't aware he had blacked out until his eyes fluttered open, the bright light of the sun causing him to squint once he came to.

He had ended up face down on the ground, the rough and uneven nature of it poking into his face. He must've hit the ground hard because he had a splitting headache, the world around him spinning even in its hazy state. He could barely see the small rocks that laid a few feet away, their gray color meshing with the black granite that seemed to swallow his entire world, minus the bright blue sky that was visible if he looked up slightly. But the movement of his eyes made him feel nauseous, so he didn't try to look around more than he had to.

*His whole body felt like ice and he was surprised he wasn't shivering because of that. Though, maybe it was because it felt like anvils were weighing him down to earth. When he tried to move his arms, or his head, or even tried to take a deep breath, he couldn't. The most he could manage was a shaky wheeze as his lungs constricted for more air, and panic began to rise up from the dazed limbo he found himself in. He couldn't feel his hands or his feet, which terrified him as he tried to wiggle his fingers for any sign of life. The entire world was spinning on its head around him, making him feel sicker and sicker by the second, while his eyes burned and ached when he tried to close them. Everything felt **wrong**.*

However, he did feel the way cold hands swatted away something... chewing on his hair?

"Friend, Tommy's hair is not hay! Shoo, shoo!"

That voice was so familiar.

Where was he?

"Wilbur?"

Cold, calloused hands touched his face again, slowly turning his head to face his brother-

"Not yet, Toms. It's Ghostbur."

Right.

Biting his lip, he tore his eyes from the ghostly, blurry visage of an imposter, a watered down and painful remnant of what was and would never be again. The whole movement made him feel completely overwhelmed with nausea, groaning lowly as he squeezed his eyes shut. The soreness of his tear ducts were sharp pains, but he held them closed, not wanting to make himself sick.

*In reality, he just couldn't handle seeing Ghostbur; couldn't handle how utterly **frozen** he felt inside, the ghost unintentionally making it worse by trying to prod him to a sitting position.*

"You've gotta sit up, Tommy. I think you might be dehydrated, you don't look so well - have some blue, have some blue, calm yourself," Ghostbur murmured, forcing some of his signature lapis into Tommy's limp hands. When the blonde tried to grip the lapis, he barely was able to muster more than a weak squeeze before they became limp again, every tendon in his fingers feeling like pin-needles were stabbing into them.

"Oh dear, that's not good. You really should sit up, Tommy, I can help you better. You can pet Friend, too! Wouldn't you like to pet Friend?"

Ghostbur made it sound like he was talking to a small child rather than to Tommy. Still, the ghost got a firm grip on the teen's underarms, and before Tommy could protest, he felt himself being pulled upright. The motion, even with his eyes firmly shut, was enough to make him want to double-over, his once dull headache became a quick migraine as his stomach churned and his chest felt even more constricted than before, his breathing becoming uneven and quicker than it should've been.

He let out a silent cry of pain, no noise leaving his mouth except for the raspy wheezes he was taking as he was steadied in place. Once Ghostbur removed his hands, it was replaced by a heavy, woolly body finding itself a home in Tommy's lap, a loud baa and jingle of a bell making it clear that this was Friend.

Despite his hands feeling like they were weighed down by bar-bells, he managed to lift them enough to set them in Friend's finely groomed wool, the sinking feeling and the softness comforting as the docile animal passively laid there. He had half the mind to face-plant into the creature, knowing that the amount of wool would cushion him and the sheep enough for the impact, but the idea of moving suddenly caused him to internally gag.

"You look awful, Toms. I've been away too long again, haven't I? I'm sorry, I didn't realize I had lost so much time. I could've sworn I saw you yesterday - but maybe that was two weeks ago - oh I'm sorry, Tommy, you'll have to forgive the amnesiac, again. Everything is scrambled up here, it's hard to keep track," Ghostbur babbled on, floating behind Tommy as he played with a few strands of his hair.

What Ghostbur really meant, in Tommy's twisted thoughts, was that he had lost interest in him. Tommy wasn't energetic, he didn't keep up conversation, nor did he try to even act interested in what Ghostbur had to say. Not anymore.

No one has a use for an old dog, so why keep it when you could get a new one? Tommy was

replaceable; he had seen Tubbo and Ranboo around sometimes, and that was usually the starring accomplice in Tubbo's stories when he came for the rare visit. And Tubbo was allowed to have other friends, Tommy didn't need to be included in everything the moobloom did. Tubbo seemed to be faring well without him, anyways. Maybe even better than he was when they were together. Ranboo was a change of pace Tubbo needed, and Tommy couldn't be happier for him.

Fundy had Eret and all of the Badlands at his fingertips, and given how little he leaves the castle, Tommy knew that he had found new people to call 'family.' He wasn't an orphan anymore, and Eret was probably a great parent, and if the booms at night coming from the direction of Eret's castle were anything to go by, Fundy was probably having a blast inventing.

Techno and Phil were quick to drop him the moment he went rogue, and never bothered to send an apology letter or even a crow to check on him, making it quite clear he wasn't their concern any more than Wilbur had been when he was alive. Besides, they had each other, and that's all they've known, anyways. They would be fine.

So, what did Tommy have? What was his support? What were his reasons to keep going?

Tommy had his bench. He had his discs. He had his 'peace.' But material items held no comparison to the intangible sense of home:

They were nothing compared to Tubbo's mischievous grin when he got an idea, or the way he always made Tommy laugh until he cried, something absurd always on the tip of the moobloom's tongue.

They were nothing compared to how clever Fundy's pranks were while still being harmlessly good-natured, or how he had always tried to make everyone smile even in the most dismal of situations.

They were nothing compared to the ancient tales retold by Techno by warm firelight, or the sparring matches that turned more into playful rough-housing than a combat lesson.

They were nothing compared to the times when Phil would take him flying, or when he would have Tommy accompany him on walks, laughter and snow-crunching footsteps echoing through the mountain canyons and through the cave systems they found themselves in.

They were nothing compared to Wilbur's melodic guitar sonnets, or how he tried so hard to play both a brother and father to Tommy, Tubbo, and Fundy, trying to encourage their interests while making sure it wouldn't get them killed, because there was no one else to do it but him.

No, his material possessions were incomparable to the family he let slip through his fingers so blindly. He always considered himself a fiercely loyal heroine, but now he could see he was just as selfish and maliciously ambitious as the villains he claimed to be against.

He wasn't a hero, or a martyr, or a brother, or a son anymore-

He was alone, with a few meaningless trophies as compensation for all of his hard work that should've never mattered more than the people involved in his childish war.

"You've really oughta cut this dreadful mess if you won't take care of it. Has this been brushed recently? And why are you wearing that coat, it looks like it hasn't been washed in months! Seriously, we need to get you some new clothes. Not that I don't like your usual shirts, but I mean something like a sweater or an actual jacket, spice up your wardrobe-"

"Go away, Ghostbur," Tommy's voice broke many times despite only uttering three words, but he said it with enough conviction that it made the ghost quiet, pausing his hands rifling through the knots in Tommy's blonde curls. Tommy's fingers dug anxiously deeper into the sapphire wool of Friend in return, the fleece thick yet pliable enough to assure him the sheep was still there. His eyes were still screwed shut on dried-out and sore tear ducts, his head was still pounding like a war-drum, and his stomach continued to do nauseating somersaults.

He still felt so, so cold.

"I don't understand? Did I say something mean- oh I'm terribly sorry, if it was about your hair it's not actually that bad, maybe a wash and some combing and I'm sure you'd look presentable in no time-" Ghostbur rambled, resuming to run his fingers through the knots in Tommy's hair, this time with a little more fervor than before.

"No, it's okay. You didn't say anything," Tommy barely moved his head away from Ghostbur's hands before the feeling of his hair being teased became absent. He was so quietly spoken, his voice cracking every other syllable like a broken record. "Just.. I don't want you here."

His fingers gripped Friend's wool tighter, aware of how exposed he was. This felt nothing like when these kinds of spells happened at nighttime, which had become a frequent occurrence over the past week. In his house, he had a wall corner to press himself against and blankets to cocoon into. Here, in the middle of a crater, he had nothing but the rocky ground beneath him and a patient sheep who didn't seem bothered by how tight of a hold he had on their wool.

"Oh... D-Did I do something wrong-?" Tommy could hear the frown in the ghost's voice, bubbling with confusion and sorrow that pained Tommy to his very core.

"No!" He cut him off, fighting the pain of pressure building in his throat as he continued. "No, I-I never- no! No, Ghostbur I just... It's not you, Ghostbur. I-it was never... It was never your fault."

"What do you mean? It wasn't yours either, Toms."

The response was harmless. Ghostbur only remembered the best of everything. He can't have possibly understood the implications of what he said, of what Tommy was hinting at.

Ghostbur couldn't remember how Dream would blow up his belongings or berate him or rough him up for fun.

Ghostbur couldn't know how much Tommy really blamed himself for everything; for Wilbur's death, for his family's splitting, for his exile, for his neglect.

He deserved it.

It wasn't Ghostbur's fault Tommy couldn't say the right thing the first time.

It wasn't Ghostbur's fault Tommy was a failure, a brat, or, as someone he cared about once called him, a Theseus.

It impacted him all the same, and as the terrifying words sunk deeper into his mind, he buried his face in Friend's side to hide the choked wails, not caring about the way his body quivered with each tearless sob or how his head throbbed with each keen.

They broke him in the least deserving way possible.

They broke him with the forgiveness he denied himself.

####

"Who's there? If you don't move, I'm gonna assume you're dead and take your horse."

Tommy's eyelashes were frosted together, but they ripped apart as they opened, startled by the unfamiliar voice calling up to him. He nearly lost his balance on the tree branch he was perched on, wobbling dangerously before steadying himself with a steel-grip on the bark.

He had not really thought through his attempt to get to SnowChester in the middle of the night, let alone a rainstorm that turned into a harrowing blizzard halfway through his journey as he ventured into the thick, frozen wilderness that surrounded the settlement. His hoodie and pyjama pants were drenched with rain by the time his horse's hooves touched the first bits of snow, and it was only after another half hour that they had become hard and covered with snow.

His lack of weapons and light also contributed to his position in the tree. Somewhere along the

journey, he must've gotten turned around because he realized he had no idea where he was. With daylight nowhere in sight, the sounds of groans and hissing were a constant ringing in his ears despite the wind roaring past his ears as he urged his horse to gallop faster. Eventually, a creeper appeared in front of his horse and, spooked by the green monstrosity, they bucked upwards suddenly. Tommy had no saddlehorn or reins to hold onto, and with the cold having numbed his hands a considerable amount, his grip faltered and he fell off the horse's back and onto the ground. They ran away, and Tommy was left to sprint through thick snow after them, the creeper following him joined by two zombies.

He lost the horse's track after a few minutes, and with the noises of monsters surrounding him like a pack of hungry wolves, he clambered up the nearest tree, holding his breath and praying that he wouldn't be discovered by a spider. He wouldn't be any good to Tubbo if he was dead. Then, he must've fallen asleep, adrenaline fading off and exhaustion taking its place because he couldn't remember much after that. Now, he could see that the forest was alight with sunlight peeking through the trees, with no more snowstorm or monsters in sight and quiet besides the chirping of birds and the huffs of horses below.

Carefully, Tommy peeked down from his branch, ignoring how his hoodie attempted to stay stuck to the tree's trunk (it probably froze somewhat to the bark during the night). Surprisingly, his horse that had rudely abandoned him was now standing at the tree's base, moving snow around with their nose to find the permafrost grass beneath it. Their cream-colored tail swished, and he glared at their brown pinto-colored head before looking to the person who had called out to him.

His eyes widened even more, but this time, he was relieved as a hesitant grin appeared on his face.

“ *Big Q?* ”

Indeed, it was. Sitting on top of his beloved white horse, he was dressed in a navy-blue jacket and black pants, a pair of combat boots taking the place of the worn-out sneakers Tommy had seen him with last. His signature beanie was gone from his head, the raven-colored hair pulled into a small ponytail at the back of his head. Tommy could see that Quackity's eyes were bicolored, his left eye being a mud-brown while his right was a cloudy-white. The large scar traveling down from his eyebrow probably had something to do with it, as it went down the blind eye and further before disappearing beneath the mask that concealed the rest of the disfigurement.

He had a bag attached to the saddle that looked filled to the brim with food and arrows, and a sword sheath hung off the otherside, the hilt of the weapon glinting in the morning sun while a bow was slung across the man's torso, the whittled wood amateur but good enough to deal damage.

Quackity's eyes squinted up at Tommy before taking on a look of astonishment. “Tommy? Is that you?”

“Holy shit, Big Q!” Tommy exclaimed, his grin becoming an excited smile.

Quackity's mask moved up slightly, a smile formed beneath it. “Get down here, man! What the hell are you even doing up there?”

Tommy was quick to climb down, slipping only a few times before landing safely on the snow below beside his horse. Quackity had climbed off his horse and met him there, wrapping him in a

hug that Tommy returned, cringing at how his hoodie crunched beneath the embrace. Quackity must've taken notice of that as well, because as he pulled away he put a hand up to Tommy's forehead before quickly pulling it away.

"Jesus Christ, dude, you're like an icicle. How long have you been out here?" He asked, looking over Tommy's clothes and grimacing at the state of them.

"Oh, uhm," Tommy chuckled awkwardly, his smile fading for a moment as he looked at his horse to avoid Quackity's gaze. Rubbing the back of his neck, the friction providing little warmth as his body seemed to finally react, shivers creeping up his spine and his jaw locking up to chatter his teeth. "I dunno.. Since last night, or early this morning."

All that came from Quackity was a short gasp before his jacket was shrugged off his shoulders, forcing Tommy to take it despite his protests of it being too small.

"It's better than that hoodie. Are you even wearing- oh my god, you're not even wearing shoes! What were you thinking?!" Quackity scolded, though it had more care and concern behind it than harsh belittlement as he took off his gloves and handed them to Tommy as well. Tommy simply rolled his eyes as he put the jacket on, relishing in the leftover body heat left over from Quackity, even though the jacket *was* tight.

Looking at Quackity's now unjacketed body, he was wearing a wrinkled, white dress shirt, a black tie loosely hung around his neck while the sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. A pair of brown suspenders finished the oddly formal look, while his mallard-colored duck wings stretched themselves out from his back before covering his upper-body like a shawl. They weren't huge, but they were big enough for him to be shielded from the elements.

"C'mon, get up on your horse. We're only about a mile or so out from Tubbo's place, if his little map he sent me a few months ago is still accurate," Quackity urged, motioning to Tommy's pint who had wandered to another tree while they spoke. "I'm sure you can get some proper clothes there."

Tommy perked up. "Only a mile? I thought I was lost, nothing looks familiar."

"Probably because you are. I was coming from the northeast, so you must've gotten turned around at night to be this far up," Quackity reasoned, walking Tommy to his horse before helping him up. He then led the horse with a lead to him, pulling himself into the saddle before turning both of their steeds to the right, clicking his horse into a trot with a stern, "Vamos."

"Speaking of, what are you even doing out here? Last time I heard about you, a hotel was involved. Hope you aren't trying to compete with Las Nevadas," Quackity continued as they rode through the trees, ducking beneath branches as they came and avoiding dripping icicles. There was a light playfulness in Quackity's tone that let Tommy relax for the first time in hours, though that was quickly erased as he realized *why* he was out here.

"Big Q, we need to go, I-I completely forgot about everything for a minute- oh god we need to go, like now-"

"Woah, slow down. What's wrong?" Quackity briefly halted the horses, only making Tommy's panic build worse than it had last night.

"It's Tubbo- Snowchester- Sam texted and I don't know- Tubbo is dead? He said something about a heart attack- Big Q, we have to go, I need to see him-"

“Big breaths, man. We’ll go, but it won’t help if you pass out on the way,” Quackity looked just as disturbed as Tommy was, but he made a good point. So Tommy did take deep breaths, and once he was at least not going to hyperventilate, Quackity set their horses off into a gallop, snow kicking up behind them and trees whizzing past in dark blurs.

Fifteen minutes later, Tommy could’ve cried when he saw the gray smoke entrails of civilization in the sky, the trees thinning out to reveal a beautiful, quiet town in the distance.

###

Schlatt usually loved the mornings, despite what many may think.

Especially on mornings when sunlight was soft and not glaring through the windows, and when the birds outside sang and chirped to celebrate another sunrise. When he was sitting in an armchair, a hot coffee beside him and shaking off the grogginess from waking up as he enjoyed the few peaceful moments before the day officially began.

Except, the curtains were drawn over the frosted windows, his coffee mug had been untouched and long gone cold, he was wide-awake, and the armchair he sat in was facing a sleeping Tubbo, covered up by blankets and looking absolutely awful even after the effects of a Totem of Undying. While most of his body was covered in blankets, his head peeked out from the fabric mass, resting atop pillows that were also piled for the teen. His eyes looked sunken-in with dark, depressing shadows forcing a contrast on his deathly pale face to look worse.

There were others gathered in the living room; Sam was slumped against a wall half-asleep, Foolish and Connor shared the loveseat adjacent to the couch Tubbo was asleep on, and Ranboo, as Schlatt had come to learn was the name of the enderman-hybrid, was sleeping against the armrest of the couch. Michael was asleep beside him, much to Ranboo’s chagrin when the toddler made his choice during the night. He had tried to give Michael over to the two-toned teen multiple times, but it was useless as the piglin would keep circling back to Schlatt’s armchair, nestling himself a place beside the ram.

It would’ve been cute had Schlatt not been on the receiving end of Ranboo’s dagger-glares every time Michael did it.

Really, everyone was on the receiving end of the teen’s pissed-off attitude, with the exception of Michael. He may have not really *said* anything yet, but they all knew it was coming the moment he would get the chance (if the purple particles floating around him grew in intensity was anything to go by). He definitely didn’t want to yell in front of Michael, and Schlatt was really surprised he hadn’t cracked even slightly despite the pressure he must’ve felt. Probably *still* feels.

The teen’s words were curt and sharp to them last night, but he never raised his voice. Not once. That kind of calm and resolve both scared and impressed Schlatt. Not that he would let anyone

know that.

According to Ranboo, though, they had been searching the house top to bottom for Michael, who wasn't anywhere to be found. He stopped his search when he heard something heavy falling to the ground, and when he found Tubbo, he was on the floor in the living room and completely unresponsive. After checking his pulse and breathing and not finding any sign of life, that's when the enderman screamed out for help, and when everyone within a mile's radius came running.

By the time Schlatt had got there, having left Michael behind with Connor in their house, Foolish and Sam were already inside. Foolish was in and out of the living room, leaving into what Schlatt could only assume to be a bedroom only to exit with blankets and pillows heaped in his arms, tossing them on the couch haphazardly as he constantly side-stepped the group in the middle of the room. That group in question consisted of Sam, who was both checking over an unconscious Tubbo who was half-sat up in Ranboo's lap and trying to wipe away at Ranboo's eyes, which streamed tears and hissed as it made contact with his two-toned skin.

Schlatt didn't need anyone to tell him what happened as his eyes caught the glint of a used totem laying a few feet away, the green gems having turned to rust and the golden metal now a lackluster silver as Schlatt's heart plummeted.

Since then, the entire 'squad' had planted themselves in the house, offering their help and refusing to leave until Tubbo woke up. Which was good, because obviously they didn't want to leave and risk something going wrong again. What was bad, however, was that they should've been more attentive in the first place so that this never happened.

Ranboo said what summed up most of the adults' hindsight at one point, after Tubbo had settled onto the couch and the rest of them gathered in the spots they sat or stood in now:

"He was suffering, and all of you were too caught up with keeping a tight leash on a dead guy to notice."

No one had the gall to argue with that. And unfortunately, he really wasn't wrong.

During his entire stay in SnowChester, Schlatt had been kept under strict monitoring by Sam, while Connor tagged along for everything the ram did. He knew why, and he was okay with the precaution Sam was taking when it came to himself. However, now that he was thinking about it, he could barely turn one way without seeing the spray-painter mask. He honestly couldn't recall a moment when Sam wasn't nearby, ready to pull a sword on him if he breathed wrong or excusing himself for a moment to go check on Tubbo, who only made the occasional appearance when Michael found his way to interrupting Schlatt's chores (not that he minded). Even when Tubbo came by to give them cooked dinner, something he didn't have to do, no one had bothered to ask him how he was holding up or if he needed help or if he had changed his mind about Schlatt staying in SnowChester. It was a brief exchange of thanks and stiff small-talk between Tubbo and Sam before the moobloom would excuse himself, and that was that.

Schlatt wasn't blaming Sam entirely, though. They were all negligent, and each of them were at

fault for not keeping an eye on him like they, or at least those who Tubbo trusted, should have. Still, there was nothing they could do to rectify that now. Time-travel isn't real, because if it was then Schlatt would've turned back time months ago to punch himself in the face. What was real, though, is learning and growing from events. So, all Schlatt could do is accept what happened and move forward with this experience in mind, and hopefully be able to prevent it if there was a next time.

God, he sounded like a sappy motivational quote. He needs to stop listening to Wilbur so much.

####

The sounds of horses approaching was what really woke the house up, aside from Tubbo.

Sam was the first to react, jolting himself from his half-asleep state to peek out one of the front window's curtains at the arrivals, while Foolish and Connor turned to where Sam was looking, straining their necks to fruitlessly try to get a look out of the window. Ranboo stirred, rubbing at his eyes and glancing at his sleeping friend on the couch. Michael had been up, wandering around the living room and playing with a few toys, blissfully unaware of anything going on.

Schlatt went to stand until Sam looked back at him, a look of serious concern and confusion furrowed in his eyebrows.

"You need to hide somewhere, now."

It wasn't long until he had been ushered into one of the bedrooms that connected to the living room, the door being shut on him by Sam and Schlatt being forced to press his ear to the door in order to hear anything going on.

The sound of the front door opening was the first he heard, followed by shuffling from people moving and getting up, he presumed. Then, there were muffled shouts from outside, the voice being of Sam before Schlatt heard someone stumble up the front stairs of the house, entering the threshold with heavy footsteps and breathing like they had been running for miles.

"Tommy? What-?" Schlatt heard Ranboo gasp, more movement being heard as he assumed the enderman was making his way over to the teen. Schlatt himself held back a gasp, Tommy being the last, but probably most logical, person he would've thought of.

"Where's Tubbo? Where is he? Is he dead?" Tommy's voice came out in wheezes, but the panic behind them was obvious. How he had caught wind of Tubbo so quickly was strange, but Schlatt could only imagine what the kid must be feeling. It was his best-friend, his brother, and after everything they've been through... this was the last thing he needed. Especially if Wilbur had introduced himself back into the blonde's life; he could only hope that had gone over better than Schlatt's did.

"H-He's fine, now. On the couch, asleep. How did you even know?"

There was no reply, only more movement as someone (Tommy, presumably) staggered away from

Ranboo, who sounded like he was following after. There was a thump on the ground as someone sat less than gracefully on the floor, and more shuffling as who he could only assume to be Foolish or Connor rushing in the direction of the kitchen. The morning's breeze made the doorknob of the front door knock against the wall quietly with each gust, indicating to Schlatt it was still open.

There was murmuring too low for Schlatt to hear, but he knew it had to be Tommy and Ranboo. He could also hear sniffing from their direction, and Schlatt wouldn't be surprised if Tommy was the one who was crying. He must be sitting on the floor in front of Tubbo, checking him over while Ranboo hopefully assured him that the moobloom was okay, at least physically. More movement came from the kitchen, the sounds of a glass being set down on one of the end-tables next to the couch while someone else walked towards the front door, their footsteps disappearing outside.

The next thing he heard was struggling, the sound of feet stomping on the ground and clothes brushing against clothes quickly like they were thrashing around.

"Let me go-!"

"Tommy, your fingers and feet are turning blue. You need to change and lay down, you look exhausted," Foolish's voice reasoned. "C'mon, it won't take long- OW!"

Something fell to the floor with a loud thump while someone hissed in pain, muttering underneath their breath.

"Michael! We do not *bite* Foolish!" Ranboo incredulously scolded.

There was a snort in reply, followed by more squeals before they dissipated, Michael either contently in his father's arms or hanging off of Tommy.

"Good work, Big M," Tommy chuckled lightly, his voice not as tight and breathless as it had been when he arrived, obvious taking endearment from the toddler's misbehavior.

"... Tell me you did not teach him that," Ranboo replied, the hope in his voice nonexistent.

"A magician never reveals his battle tactics."

A deep sigh from Ranboo. "You are so lucky that you're Michael's favorite uncle."

"I am the best one."

"And you're gonna be the frostbitten one too if you don't listen to Foolish."

"... They're not *that* blue-"

"Tommy."

There was a long silence, Ranboo's stern tone felt throughout the entire room. It continued to impress Schlatt that Ranboo was so mature with everything going on, no matter what curveball was thrown his way. He adapted quickly, his resolve and calm something that rivaled a saint's, while also being sharp-tongued and quick to point out the fallacies in his opponent's argument. The teen definitely had the qualities of a good politician. Or he was just a good kid. The latter made more sense, Schlatt decided.

"... I can't leave him. Not now," Tommy said, voice wavering like it had been when he arrived. "He... he almost died. I was busy playing pretend with my dead brother, as if everything was fine in the world now-"

“Tommy, this is not your fault,” Ranboo cut him off, the stern tone switching to be much softer than before.

“Bullshit if it isn’t!” Tommy snarled, the sound of a hand being batted away complimenting the sound of the front door closing, three sets of footsteps entering into a messy situation. “I was selfish! Alright? We don’t need to sugarcoat it, it’s a well-known fact. I should’ve-”

“You couldn’t have done anything, Tommy. Nothing here is your fault, aside from your poor choice in weather-appropriate clothing,” Ranboo combated. “You’re here now though, right? Give yourself a break for a minute. There’s no point in worrying yourself with the world’s problems and letting frostbite fester on hypotheticals.”

A pause.

“He hates sleeping alone. You know that.”

There was a sense of history to Tommy’s words. The weakness folded into his voice matched his weak argument point, yet they were strong enough to make him choke up on the last word.

“C’mon,” The sound of someone being pulled up onto wobbly feet could be heard, followed by slow, unsteady footsteps mixing with patient ones as they walked from the living room. They passed right by his door, getting to hear Ranboo whisper to whom he could only assume to be Foolish about where Tommy’s unofficial room was in the basement before a door opened and closed. When it closed, only one set moved back towards the living room.

There was little silence between the basement door closing and Ranboo making his way back to where the group had been watching.

“How the heck did he even find out?” Ranboo asked.

“Puffy called while I was outside. Apparently, Tommy must’ve gotten ahold of her phone sometime last night and saw my text messages, because he wasn’t there when she woke up,” Sam explained, Schlatt imagining the way he must be pinching the bridge of his nose in stress. “Then, there was an entire interrogation by Wilbur and Fundy, both on Tubbo and Tommy, and Jesus Christ that was a mess in of itself. Long story short, they’re headed to Eret’s to borrow a few horses and are going to be here by this afternoon.”

“Fun. Great. SnowChester is finally a hit tourist town,” Ranboo replied sarcastically, footsteps moving around as he spoke.

“For angsty family reunions, yeah.”

The timing could not be worse as Michael opened the door of Schlatt’s hiding place, causing him to move out of the way instinctually and into the direct view of Quackity, who’s voice really *was* the last thing he expected to hear.

####

Schlatt gave credit where credit was due: Quackity had gotten significantly better at combat since he last saw him.

The downside was that Schlatt could barely keep up, earning him a clean slice on his calf and the wind kicked out of his chest quite literally before Sam and Connor could intervene.

Now, a bloody sword laid discarded on the floor, Schlatt was bandaging his own wound on the floor, Michael was crying into Ranboo's shoulder, Ranboo looked like he was going to murder Quackity himself, and Quackity glared purely venomous contempt at Schlatt from where he was forced to stand between Sam and Connor.

Suffice it to say, this could've gone better.

The bandages were drenched in a regeneration potion that felt like fire on his open wound, but that only meant it was working. Luckily enough, the slash was shallow too, so it would only be a few hours until it was fully healed and he wouldn't be limping around like an injured deer. Whatever sort of magic the sword was enchanted with also cauterized the wound for the most part, although it was no pleasant experience to feel with little warning. At least there wasn't much blood.

Ranboo briefly disappeared up a ladder with Michael, returning a few minutes later with the toddler absent from his arms. He must've put him down for a nap or given him something to do in the kid's room, because by the looks of it, the teen looked five seconds away from popping a blood vessel without Michael around to hold him back. The purple particles that violently swirled around his hands and legs became a bright violet color and doubled in number while his eyes were turning a similar purple.

Schlatt finished wrapping the rest of the gauze around his leg, carefully pulling himself up with the wall as support and leaning on his good leg as he watched Ranboo stop in the middle of them, pointing almost immediately at Quackity, who turned his attention from Schlatt to the enderman.

"You do *not* have any *right* to pull a *sword* with my *son* in the room," Ranboo hissed, sounding reverberated and deeper than usual. Somehow, he still refused to raise his voice, though the tone was deadly enough that it made all of them shrink away minisculely.

"I do not *care* what grudges or problems you have with Schlatt, Quackity, because so long as you are in SnowChester, you are absolutely *prohibited* from even *thinking* about a sword, or a crossbow, or *any form of weapon*. Sort it out like *ADULTS*, not like *CHILDREN*."

Quackity didn't say anything in response, offering a short apologetic nod before looking at something that wasn't Ranboo's murderous scowl, which was promptly turned onto Sam, Connor, and Schlatt, the enderman's eyes darting between them each as he moved his hands in sync with his frustration.

"*You* are all adults! You're supposed to be the ones taking care of us, not the other way around! I know Tubbo should've been taking better care of himself, but I'm not faulting him for all of your guys' negligence! He's the priority in this situation, not Schlatt, because if Schlatt wanted trouble he would've already caused it! And it only makes me even more angry when the only time Tubbo's well-being is put into question is when I have to shove a totem into his corpse's hands!"

There was a long pause, Ranboo taking in deep breaths as the purple particles that floated around

him began to decrease back to a normal amount, and his eyes turned back to a red and green compliment of the jewels in the crown he wore. No one dared to argue with the teen, only bowing their heads in abashed understanding.

“Now,” Ranboo took another breath in, his voice no longer having a deep reverb to it. “Michael is taking a nap, and I’m going to make spaghetti for everyone. Anyone is welcome to help out.”

As Ranboo turned and walked to the kitchen, Quackity was the first to follow, not sparing Schlatt a second-glance when he passed him. Sam was right behind him, leaving Schlatt and Connor to find a spot in the living room and plop down to stew in their thoughts. Schlatt took his place in the armchair he had been in earlier, careful to not let his injured calf hit anything as he made himself as comfortable as he could get.

Ranboo had said what they all knew he had been wanting to scold them for since last night. It was what they all had been thinking in the back of their minds when they watched the weak rise and fall of Tubbo’s chest beneath the mountain of blankets draped across him. Whenever Tubbo shifted slightly and got their hopes up that he was waking up, they all felt the shared guilt of knowing they had allowed this to happen when the moobloom settled, continuing to snore lightly in his deep slumber.

Schlatt only felt worse knowing he had not helped in the slightest. He wouldn’t be surprised if his appearance and sudden meddling into Tubbo’s life had been the spark to the subsequent fire that was this situation. He felt awful for not taking notice, or just leaving like he should’ve when he had the chance. It was obvious from the start that Tubbo was still full to the brim with grief and resentment and fear, and mixing that with the stress of his everyday duties, on top of his son’s odd attachment to Schlatt was a dangerous cocktail of way too many red-flags that could’ve been avoided.

There were a lot of things that could be avoided in his life. Yet, he always chose the harder paths: for his career, for his relationships, for himself. Harder hardly ever meant rewarding, either; the only title that could be given to was his presidency and his company, and look at where those both were now. No, harder only meant he dug himself a grave with each word and swig of whiskey that went down his throat. Some would say he took the easy route by drowning himself with alcohol. Schlatt would argue that it was the result of speeding his way down a rocky road, with no friends or livelihood to keep him steady. He had set himself up for failure with each choice he made late in his previous life, and it wouldn’t have been fair if he didn’t reap what he had sown into those he had affected.

Still, he hadn’t come back just to run from his problems. He wasn’t taking an easy way out, because that was a weak man’s choice. He wasn’t going to leave with Connor to try and forget about his mistakes, the pain he caused, the families he had torn apart and the people he had wronged. He would own up to those mistakes, and whether that meant being told to screw off by everyone he met and forced to live as an outcast, or meet his end at the end of a sword or arrowhead from a bow, he’d accept it. He wasn’t optimistic about being the perfect example of redemption. He didn’t want to be, even. All Schlatt wanted was to forgive himself, to prove he was trying to be better.

He knew it would take an entire lifetime to come to peace with himself and his demons, but a lifetime was better than an eternity of anger and regret.

Minutes past until the door that led into the basement was opened, and Foolish walked out behind a... god, Tommy did look terrible. His hair was a bedheaded, blonde mess of knots and tangles, and the red sweater that he had on hung off of him like he was made of bone. His feet were wrapped in medical tape, causing him to waddle awkwardly on the balls of his heels and sling an arm over Foolish's shoulders for support. His fingers were also wrapped up, nearly blending in with his nearly grey skin. He shook slightly, though from hypothermia or from stress was anyone's bet.

When their eyes met, Schlatt was quick to nod at the teenager, who only stared back in a mix of bewilderment and distrust, scowling at him. Foolish helped Tommy to the living room, letting him sit down on the other end of the couch Tubbo was on. Tommy crossed his legs on the cushion, pulling one of the many blankets off of Tubbo to steal for himself, wrapping it around himself before his attention was brought back to Schlatt, ignoring Foolish's comment of getting him hot chocolate before the gold man left the tension that rose in the room.

"You're a good friend, y'know," Schlatt said after some minutes passed, the staring and the silence getting unbearable.

"I don't want to hear anything from your stupid mouth," Tommy spat, making it clearly evident he was not going to be friendly. That was okay; Schlatt expected nothing less from the spunky teen.

"Just saying. 'Nearly froze yourself trying to get here. It shows how much you care,'" Schlatt responded calmly, looking away from Tommy and to the kitchen where he heard light conversation and the metallic clanging of pots and pans. "Although, I do agree with Ranboo, you probably should've worn something better suited for the environment."

"Why would you care? You'd probably be thrilled if I lost a foot to hypothermia."

"If I was, Wil would kill-"

"It's Wilbur to you, asshole," Tommy hissed, cutting Schlatt off and glaring at him.

Schlatt held his hands up in a defense position. "Didn't mean anything by it."

"You don't get to talk about him. Or act like you care. Stop messing with everyone, I can see right through you."

Schlatt looked at Tommy, quirking an eyebrow. "I'm not a ghost, though."

Tommy only rolled his eyes in response, an unamused sigh escaping his lips as he settled into the corner of the couch, body faced towards Schlatt but looking at Tubbo, who continued to be unbothered by the commotion that revolved around his outside world.

It was going to be a bumpy road, but this time, the destination was something Schlatt knew would be rewarding as much as it would bring peace with others; and within himself.

####

Having acute senses came in handy when trying to find a bright blue sheep, Fundy found.

He had still yet to shake Tubbo from his side, the brunette insisting he at least help find Friend before he departed. Somehow, Tubbo had barely shown any emotion to Fundy's statement, though Fundy had grown up with Tubbo enough to know that was his default reaction to a lot of things said to or about him. He put on a blank expression, a mask of indifference to hide his hurt, disbelief, anything he deemed necessary in the moment.

Fundy knew what he said hurt Tubbo. It hurt himself when he said it. Truth was hurtful, though. They weren't kids anymore, true. There was nothing really holding them together anymore, because none of them seemed to care or be brave enough to reach out, to face each other and talk everything out, true (well, not everything, but at least about the things that hurt each other.) Tommy's exile, Tubbo's execution, Fundy's betrayal for love... none of it was ever discussed, only used as ammunition to fuel their heated arguments and vehemently try to prove who was in the right, which was unfortunately true. He was done trying to fix his relationships like they were one of his inventions, true. He was tired of trying to make amends in the ways he thought would work, true.

He was ready to let go.

... He wasn't. He just told himself he was.

Following the musky barn scent Friend left, he found it went down into the crater, a very narrow but climbable path leading to the bottom, carrying with it the scent. He groaned, about to carefully make his way down when Tubbo tapped him on the shoulder suddenly.

"What? Yes, I'm confident in my nose-"

"No, Fundy, look," Pointing out into the distance, Tubbo's eyes were squinting at something. Fundy turned from where he stood, landing on what Tubbo was definitely pointing out. It was Friend, except Ghostbur was hunched over a mess of yellow that laid on Friend's back. They were right near the old L'Manberg flag, and even from his distance Fundy could spot the flowers left at the pole's base.

They only knew one person with that blonde of hair, even if it wasn't as vibrant as it had once been.

"What's Tommy doing all the way out here..?" Tubbo asked aloud, the question sounding like a thought more than anything.

"Didn't you say you were meeting him?" Fundy asked in turn, letting his eyes drift from the figures in favor to look at Tubbo, who looked confused.

"At our bench, yeah. Not here. He hates this place," Tubbo answered almost absent-mindedly, slowly moving to get in front of Fundy, making his way down the crater as Fundy followed behind.

Fundy had entirely forgotten about the bench. He had said he'd visit Tommy there.

Guilt gnawed on his heart. Maybe he was a hypocrite for saying he tried to make amends, when Tommy had given him an opportunity and he squandered it.

Then again, he lived in a family of hypocrites.

Making their way to the base of the crater took less time than he thought it would, and before they knew it, he and Tubbo were halfway to the trio in the center of the crater. The uneven ground caused some issues, the fox periodically tripping before catching himself while having to walk around or jump over holes. Fundy makes note of this, only because he picks up the faint sounds of sobbing while Ghostbur seemed to be trying to comfort Tommy with back rubs.

He takes off with little warning, causing Tubbo to call after him before the moobloom was almost in stride with him. Their approach was noticed by Ghostbur, who seemed to brighten up despite a distressed crease in his brows.

*"Tubbo! Fundy! Tommy, look, it's your favorite people! They always cheer you up!" Ghostbur encouraged, waving briefly at the two as they skidded to a halt in front of them. The ghost then looked back down at Tommy, who looked **awful**.*

Fundy didn't even need to see his face to know how bad he had gotten. His corn-colored hair was now a greyish yellow, shoulder length and greasy. It was matted with dirt and knots from being uncared for for god knows how long. He wore a very, very familiar jacket, and by the looks of it, it was the extent of his warm attire, one of his signature t-shirts beneath it, stained with dirt and grime. His skin was a sickly white, and he looked so gaunt even from the angle he was seeing him from, his clothes hanging off his frame despite him having fitted them just fine a few months ago. Not to mention the pungent odor he smelled of. It was as if he hadn't showered for a week.

Ghostbur's words seemed to stall Tommy's sobs, coming out as more whimperish as he gripped Friend even tighter and pressed himself deeper into the wool, as if he would disappear if he buried himself deep enough. He shook like he was freezing, and Fundy wouldn't be surprised. It had been cold enough for him to put on a coat this morning, and he had fur. Tommy's coat barely counted as anything warm.

"... oh my god," Tubbo gasped, hand going over his mouth as he looked at something lying on the ground near Tommy. The moobloom had reached down to grab it before Fundy could catch a glimpse, but when Tubbo held it in a trembling hand, Fundy's heart felt like it stopped entirely.

Poison. That was a bottle of pure poison.

Carefully, Fundy took it from Tubbo, turning around and throwing it as hard and far as he could, the shattering of glass in the distance satisfying as an uneasy feeling settled in his chest. He could tell Tubbo felt it too by the way he stared, mouth agape at Tommy as he tried to form words. He didn't get the chance to as Tommy decided to speak, slowly sitting up to reveal puffy, shadowed

eyes, bloodshot and almost completely grey. He didn't look at them, but he looked in their general direction.

Fundy wasn't sure he could handle making eye-contact with Tommy if he had looked at them. It might make him cry from how much raw emotion was left stirring in the teen's entire body, let alone his dry eyes that looked painful to blink.

"J-Just let me die in peace," Tommy pleaded, his gaze downcast. "I won't be a b-bother anymore, I promise."

That was enough to make both of them drop down beside Tommy, hugging him tightly as he burst into another fit of sobs, Fundy feeling his own eyes well up with tears. Ghostbur joined in on the hug as well, not complaining when his skin sizzled from a stray tear or two. Tommy was freezing, which explained the shaking, but his low-body temperature worried Fundy to the point he had slipped off his own jacket, wrapping it on Tommy's shoulders as another layer of protection.

It had taken a while until Tommy had calmed down again, and when he did, his voice was raspy and meek. "I don't deserve this."

"You deserve a hug, Tommy. I think we've all been long overdue for one," Ghostbur chimed in.

"Tommy, were... were you planning to drink that potion?" Tubbo asked warily, ignoring Ghostbur's cheery attempts to make the situation better.

Tommy swallowed nervously. "Y... Y-Yes. I was."

It made Fundy's heart sink.

"I... I'm so sorry, Tommy, we-"

"Sorry for what?" Tommy cut him off, voice catching in his throat a bit. "You guys moved on. I- It's understandable. I did a lot of bad things that hurt y-you. This is my repentance."

"We all did a lot of things that hurt each other," Fundy countered. "You... You don't deserve to die over it."

When there was no response from him, Tubbo added on.

"We've all been dickheads to each other. But Tommy, if you ever thought we hated you, I'm so sorry."

"It's not that," Tommy answered. "I just... I don't forgive myself for what I-I let happen."

"What would that be?"

"Everything," He said, his voice becoming a whisper-like tone. "I h-had every chance to s-stop things, and I d-didn't because I was selfish and d-dumb and arrogant to s-see that there was another solution. There are s-so many things I've done wrong a-and I can't f-fix anything. You guys have lives now, no one thinks I'm worth t-the time to check on, Dad and Techno are gone, Wilbur is g-gone, you guys are... I'm a-alone. It feels l-like exile all over again, and I d-don't want to add to everyone's problems, so I thought..."

Fundy knew they had all hugged Tommy a little tighter as the blonde choked up again, registering his words as they brought Fundy and Tubbo to tears. Even Ghostbur was crying, his face stained in blue streaks as he rested his chin on Tommy's head.

"I'm sorry that I exiled you and that we fought over stupid things, and I forgive you for any disagreement we've ever had," Tubbo apologized quietly.

"I'm sorry for betraying you guys and letting you guys suffer while I lived in a lap of luxury. I forgive you guys for everything," Fundy murmured.

"I'm sorry for forgetting a lot and not checking in frequently. I also forgive everyone," Ghostbur added.

It took Tommy a minute to join the bandwagon. "I'm sorry for being selfish and letting myself get carried away, and also for risking everyone's lives at one point or another. I also forgive you all."

By this point, they were all crying messes, exchanging apology after apology until they eventually fell into laughter over a few absurd apologies ("I'm sorry for trapping you in the wall," Tubbo had snickered, which made Tommy burst into a fit of giggles. Fundy didn't understand the reference), the mood feeling lighter in the air.

There was still a lot they needed to talk about, but that could come later, when they were better equipped and more prepared. They were all broken in some way, and it wasn't a quick fix. It would take work, and it wouldn't be perfect, but they could try. They were all they had in their family of screw-ups, and Fundy would be damned if he would try to give up on either of them. They weren't going to ignore each other anymore. They were going to heal, no matter how long it took to do. And they weren't going to leave each other to suffer through that process alone. No one deserved to feel abandoned, especially when they had all experienced it one too many times in their short lives.

Right now, though, all they needed was each other, and it was enough for the first time in what was probably years of family drama and rivalry.

Tommy also needed a shower and wardrobe change. Desperately.

"Sleepover at Eret's Castle?"

####

Crows began to gather in the evergreens of the winter forest, roosting in silent murders as the birds watched over the small town. A new group of people rode in on horseback, and a few of the birds cawed in greeting upon seeing a familiar face.

Meanwhile, some turned to the sea, crowing softly as the sun continued to rise and casted shimmers over the arctic sea.

They were the only warning of what was to come, and no one would notice until it was too late.

Chapter End Notes

mmmmmm as you can see, i have many opinions on the characters of the SMP. also, fuck c!sam rn i hate him and it will show in my writing im soRRY-

follow my tweeter mayhaps: <https://twitter.com/CountedBees>

annoy me in my discord server to update faster: <https://discord.gg/y2fjw3rSbx>

anyways, i hope you guys enjoyed, and i'll catch you on the flip-side!! see yall in chapter 7 :]

A Letter to an Interlude

Chapter Notes

sorry for being gone for so long T-T

i've had a lot going on and some mental health issues that i've been recovering from, but i'm glad to at least give you guys a couple bread crumbs as i work on the next big chapter!! i hope you enjoy this small interlude, you'll get the premise pretty much as soon as you read ;3

【 P a r t O n e 】

Dear Phil,

May this letter find you in health and prosperity, or so Tommy insists I write, as prosperity is his new favorite word he's discovered as of late. Or a twelve year old, I'm glad he and Tubbo are still eager for knowledge, even when they may not use them correctly. It has been quite some time since our last correspondence. Though, I'm sure my last letter package was simply lost in the wind. Otherwise, I'd have to chastise you or the lack of effort to send the boys a 'Thank You' letter for the ather's Day present they made for you. The same goes for Techno's irthday present. Tell elder brother dearest that he surely has some time in his busy schedule to write a simple note for his younger brothers.

I am not writing to speak about my grievances this time, however. As you can see, this is not accompanied by a care package of memorabilia and cattered letters from the boys and is in fact a solo letter from myself, with minor input as you can tell from the first line. It is because this is a rather important letter that could not be sent with our periodic ackages, and grants itself a special kind of independence that has been omething I never imagined sending to you.

I'm writing to you because you are now officially a grandfather. I have a son, as of a month ago. His name is Fundy. He is fourteen years old, or so we've come to the conclusion. He could be older or younger, but it is our best guess, and he seems fine with it. I personally think he enjoys

aving a slight age advantage over the boys. He's a kitsune, a full-
ledged fox-hybrid from ear to tail, delightfully bright and charming
fter he's come out of his shell a bit. Tommy and Tubbo were swift to
ake him on as a reluctant member of their shenanigans, though Fundy
ame to be integral to advancing the quality and hilarity of pranks on
he poor, unsuspecting denizens who live around us. May Ender have mercy
n anyone unlucky enough to fall prey to their tricks.

I would like for you to meet him, in person if you could oblige us a
ew days of your time. I'm still making ends meet, so I am sorry to say
that I cannot make the trip back home if you're even there. I know
hat we did not leave off on great terms. I know those grudges have
ersisted since my time away from home. Yet, every time I see the
ccasional crow, I can't help but wonder if it's one from your murder,
atching over us. Over me.

If it yours, worry not. I have everything in control, just like I did at
ome. A change of setting does not change my ability to care for the
hildren, and they should be of no concern to you unless I stop sending
these letters and packages.

Still, throwing away my pride, and my false bravado, and with my exposed
eart, I implore you to come to visit. Tommy and Tubbo continue to slip
up and call me Dad in place of Wilbur, something that has gotten worse
ince Fundy has gifted me that moniker. They aren't forgetting you, but
hey have always unknowingly struggled with their distinctions of who's who
in our family. It pains me every time that I must remind them that I
m their brother, not their father.

Though, it seems I now play both, as if I hadn't already before.

I would also like for Fundy to form an unbiased opinion of you and
echno. I do not want him to share my own complicated feelings, and I
lso do not want him to have a pedestaled view like Tommy and Tubbo
ave. One harbors constant questioning and innate distrust, something I
on't wish for him to carry lest there comes a time he ends up in your
are. The other harbors the shattering disappointment when you don't turn
ut to be this chiseled and golden statue of everything powerful and
reat in the world. Both ultimately begin in delusion and end with
esentment, something I only wish upon myself. Though, delusion is not the
word I would use for myself. I continue to vehemently believe that my
eelings are justified.

However, I still want to be proven wrong.

I wait to be proven wrong every day, and every night I debate myself if
am right to hold onto a sense of hope that you will.

Enclosed in this letter's envelope is a picture that my wonderful neighbor,
Niki, helped take for us. I have a copy for myself, but I thought that
t would be my late Father's Day gift to you. It's of all of us in front
f that caravan I'm sure the boys have written to you about, along with
y friend Schlatt and his friend, Connor. The man in the sunglasses is

*ret, and the woman is Obviously Niki, along with her friend named Jack
eside her. If you're wondering what the banner the kids are holding up
ays, it's L'Manberg. We think we're going to stay here for a while, so we
might as well give our home a name. I've left our coordinates on the
ack of the picture. Come meet your grandson, see your sons for the first
time in a year and a half. They all have so much to tell and show
ou. Please, don't disappoint them. Don't disappoint me.*

*I need to know that we're still in your heart. That you still love us
espite my pessimism towards you. Do not punish Tommy and Tubbo because
f me, if your silence the last three packages are what you intend for
t to be.*

May this letter find you swiftly and unscathed.

Your Son,

Wilbur

p.s.

hi dad!! love you!!! - tubbo and tommym

hi grandpa! (dad helped me write this) - fundy

##Time Passes and Goes, and With It the Casualties of a War Made of Madmens' Grievous Greed
and Children's Betrayed Blood ##

Dear Wil,

This letter is one that never reached you in life, and I hope
hat in death these words can be heard by your spirit better than
when you lived. It is nothing like speaking to you directly, but
am unable to be within the confines of the Central SMP any
onger, and therefore I cannot visit your resting place. My
pologies for that inconvenience, though this method seems almost
ore respectful to your memory than speaking to a sapling in the
iddle of a field.

I cannot emphasize the regret I harbor everyday since your death. That day was the one where I truly watched our family tear itself apart. Brothers warring on three separate sides, two seeking peace and a new beginning, one seeking the abolishment of cynical government by any means necessary, and you, seeking nothing but your own demise brought on by the madness and destruction of the country you had created.

You died in pain. Anguish I cannot even fathom, and I have a good feeling I am part to blame for that. We never saw eye-to-eye, two magnets of the same side attempting to push together and hovering an arm's length apart. I just wanted to give you space to grow, and in that space, in my absence, I allowed scorn and jealousy to brew instead. It is with great regret that I also cannot tell you I've improved my parenting skills. Your death earned me my enemies and the hateful and disgusted looks when I walked the streets. It also made me come face-to-face with our conflicting sides of our family: Techno, your brothers, and your son.

Techno was rejected after his stunt in your country's demolition, and I made sure he understood. Tommy and Tubbo grieved with me. They returned to your country's remodeling in the weeks after our death with my help. Tommy got himself in trouble, Tubbo argued with him, and Tommy disappeared into exile within a week. Tubbo shut himself up in his cabinet's office. I was forgotten, or maybe they came to blame me for your death and wanted nothing to do with me. Either way, I did not try to interfere in their personal matters. I felt as if I had lost that right. You might've claimed I had given up, but I did not. I didn't try to. I wasn't their father anymore. I'm still not. I don't deserve that title.

Fundy hated me. We never met before the 16th, you would know this. I welcomed him into my house, he asked to leave, and I did not stop him. There was no point in trying to change his view of me. How could I? In his mind, I am the man with your blood staining my clothes and hands. I am not his grandfather that he was raised with stories of. To him, to your brothers, your father died that day too, the sword that pierced your chest might as well have cut my wings from my back and left me to bleed out beside you.

You were the glue of this family. I don't know how you were able to do it. I could barely keep up with Techno at times, let alone three war-torn, traumatized teenagers when they were disposed unto me. Things changed in a whirlwind, making it even harder to acclimate myself to my new, unwelcome reality. One moment, I'm coping with your death by helping your brothers rebuild and ignoring the piling letters on my desk from Techno, the next I'm holding Tubbo in the pouring rain as we both reel over Tommy's supposed suicide. Then, I'm locked away in my house, being questioned for Techno's location, scrawling a warning for your elder brother for a crow to deliver, and all of the sudden I'm watching my children try to kill each other with anvils and

words and totems all over again. I'm disowning my second youngest and my grandson as I leave one place, only to arrive at another to discover my youngest is alive and my eldest is in one piece.

I still haven't fully forgiven Techno for what he did on the 16th, but he's all I've got left aside from Tommy, who's barely recognizable in his catatonic, paranoid state he's in right now. I've done my best to help him, but he's slipping through my fingers, just like the rest of them have. I have no clue what to do, what will trigger him and what won't. Just like I had no idea how to fix Tubbo's night terrors, or how to connect with Fundy, or how to listen to Techno's scheming without fearing I'll be losing another son. I don't know what to do, Wil, I genuinely cannot think of the right thing to do here. I've already lost you, I've lost Tubbo and Fundy, and I barely have a grasp on Tommy, and soon enough I could very easily lose Techno to his own antagonism.

I wish you were here. Ghostbur is nice, but he isn't you. I can't apologize to someone I haven't wronged, and I've wronged you plenty of times.

This letter serves as my apology for not stepping-up as a father, for not interfering when I heard news of the first war, for not saving you from yourself in the depths of insanity after you handed your administration to Schlatt and tried to start a new country again. I should have been there for you, for everyone.

The past does not change. I've been around for far too long to know that it also doesn't forget. Even now, I can feel that if you were to receive this letter, you would tear it apart and spit on its shreds. You would claim my indifference and that I'm abandoning everyone once more, that I continue to prioritize Techno, and that this letter should rather be one of resignation rather than of apology.

Maybe it is my resignation letter. From what? Being a father, being an explorer, being the Angel of Death, as my legends and stories dub me? I wouldn't know, but what I do is that I want peace, to be away from the blood and acrid gunpowder and craters big enough to swallow me whole without trying, to be away from a family I think of longingly but who wish nothing but for my head on a stick, to be away from the world that has collapsed on itself and become so very backwards.

I want you to rest easy, at least. Perhaps you already are, wherever you ended up. This letter is the rambling of an old man at this point. I've never been very good at endings, I'm not as theatrical or eloquent as you were, so this is where I will finish. I apologize the ink is smudged in some places, I found that tears do not help ink dry faster.

I love you, Wil, unconditionally despite what you may have thought in life. I'm sorry that I let our family fall apart, and that I

m failing to keep it together. I will cling to Tommy and Techno
s tight as I can. I wish I could promise that Tubbo and Fundy
ould be a part of this, just like I wish I could promise that I
on't also lose ahold of either brothers I hold onto now.

I will try. I will try. I will try.

If not for my hardening heart than for your gentle soul, I will
ry to fix what you've left behind.

- Philza (Your Father, Forever and Always)

*##Time Passes and Rests, Yet Rears an Ugly Boar's Head as Crows Discard Long Forgone
Promises in the Midst of a Long Lost Battle##*

End Notes

If any CCs are uncomfortable with this fic, it will be removed!! I don't make the rules and I respect boundaries!

this entire story is inspired by one tiktok by [snapp_art_](#) , which is why the first 5 chapters are titled after the chorus of 'Feeling Good' by Michael Bublé. The video link is in the bottom notes of the first chapter and please check her out, she's a wonderfully talented artist!!! Her twitter is also [Snapp_art!!](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!